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Trauma Bonding Perspectives From Service Providers and Survivors of Sex Trafficking: A Scoping Review

Kaitlin Casassa1, Logan Knight1, and Cecilia Mengo1

Abstract
A trauma bond is an emotional attachment between an abuser and victim. Trauma bonds in sex trafficking compel victims to submit to continued exploitation and protect the trafficker. This scoping review examines trauma bonds in sex trafficking situations, its conceptualizations, and key characteristics. Ten databases were searched using sex trafficking AND trauma bonding–related terms; sex trafficking AND Stockholm syndrome, attachment, coercion, and manipulation. Articles were included if they featured trauma bonding, were published in English after 2013, or featured sex trafficking victims or traffickers in a Western country. Fifteen articles were included. The features of trauma bonding identified in these articles were (1) imbalance of power that favors trafficker, (2) traffickers’ deliberate use of positive and negative interactions, (3) victim’s gratitude for positive interactions and self-blame for the negative, and (4) victim’s internalization of perpetrator’s view. We also identified four aspects related to trauma bonding: (1) prior trauma made victims vulnerable, (2) victim’s feelings of love remained even after exiting trafficking, (3) love is why victims do not prosecute traffickers, and (4) traffickers’ intentional cultivation of the trauma bond. No article indicated how trauma bonds could be severed and replaced with healthy attachments. These findings reveal the need for practitioners and law enforcement and criminal justice professionals to address trauma bonding in both trafficking and post-trafficking situations. The findings also represent potential targets for urgently needed interventions that promote the replacement of trauma bonds with healthy attachments.

Keywords
attachment, prostitution/sex work, sexual assault

Sex trafficking is a pernicious and widespread problem around the world today, and women and children are disproportionately affected by the evil and injustices of this global problem (Clawson et al., 2009). The United States defines sex trafficking as a commercial sex act which is

induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or
the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act. (Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2000)

Under U.S. federal law, any minor engaging in commercial sex acts is automatically considered a victim of human trafficking with or without the identification of force, fraud, or coercion (Gerassi & Nichols, 2018).

Obtaining accurate prevalence data for sex trafficking is incredibly difficult due to its clandestine and illicit nature (Choo et al., 2010). Nonetheless, estimates and numbers of reported cases strongly indicate a social justice issue in urgent need of an effective response. In 2019, the Polaris Project (2020) in the United States received reports to their National Human Trafficking Hotline of 11,500 unique situations of human trafficking, involving more than 22,000 individual survivors. These numbers are of great concern, particularly because trafficked individuals generally come from vulnerable groups, often already having a history of abuse and victimization (Clawson et al., 2009; Estes & Weiner, 2001).

Traffickers and pimps typically use physical, emotional, financial, and psychological abuse to coerce victims into sexual exploitation and to continue their exploitation of these victims (Shared Hope International, 2020). As a result, victims of sex trafficking experience a plethora of physical, emotional, and psychological consequences from this exploitation (Clawson et al., 2009). Physical outcomes often include sexually transmitted diseases, traumatic brain injuries inflicted by traffickers or violent clients, and poor health from the lack of medical care

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and poor diet (Curtis et al., 2008; Farley, 2004, 2005; Muftic & Finn, 2013). A study that compared trafficked and nontrafficked sex workers (Cwikel et al., 2004) revealed higher rates of depression (57%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; 20%) in trafficked sex workers than in nontrafficked sex workers (29% and 14%, respectively). Other distressing mental health outcomes associated with sex trafficking include substance misuse, anxiety, panic disorder, intense shame, suicidal ideation, dissociation, eating disorders, and PTSD (Cole et al., 2014; Courtois & Ford, 2013; Heffernan & Blythe, 2014; Oram et al., 2012; Perry & McEwing, 2013).

Trauma bonds between sex trafficking survivors and traffickers have been noted among the many negative psychological outcomes of sex trafficking (Reid et al., 2013). Trauma bonds are emotional attachments between victims and their abusers or captors that occur in a wide variety of exploitative relationships (Hopper, 2017; Reid et al., 2013). These bonds are typically marked by paradoxical complexities of abuse, control and dependency, and deep feelings of love, admiration, and gratitude in the victim for the abuser (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015).

A review conducted by Reid et al. (2013) explored the existing empirical and clinical literature regarding trauma bonding in violent or exploitative relationships. Their review discussed existing theoretical conceptualizations of trauma bonding and features of trauma bonding in five different types of interpersonal violence, namely in hostage-taking or kidnapping situations, cults, intimate partner violence, childhood sexual abuse, and sex trafficking or forced prostitution (Reid et al., 2013). Reid et al. surmised that for trauma bonding to occur, the four needed conditions are “(a) perceived threat to one’s physical and psychological survival at the hands of an abuser, (b) perceived kindness from the abuser to the victim, (c) isolation, and (d) inability to escape” (p. 38). Reid’s (2016) concept analysis of trauma bonding echoed the following conditions: “(a) a severe power imbalance that results in isolation, vulnerability, and helplessness, and (b) intermittent and unpredictable abuses alternate between positive and violent interactions that violate trust” (p. 49). As such conditions are commonly found in relationships between sex traffickers and their victims (Herman, 2003; Spidel et al., 2007; Stark & Hodgson, 2003), it is unsurprising that trauma bonding occurs.

The paradox of the trauma bond is extremely significant to the sex trafficking survivor for three reasons as follows: (a) the victim’s attachment to the perpetrator makes it difficult for them to leave the abusive situation for safety or to leave permanently (Baldwin et al., 2015; Reid et al., 2013); (b) the victim’s attachment to the perpetrator motivates them to protect the perpetrator from legal repercussions such as prosecution for trafficking (Clawson & Grace, 2007; Nichols, 2016); this protection of the perpetrator often extends to moral responsibility as well, where the victim self-blames for the perpetrator’s abusive acts or labels these acts as loving, rational, or kind despite them being injurious to themselves (Jüllich, 2005); and (c) the victim experiences diminished trust in outsiders or formal systems of help or protection (such as social services or the police) often due to internalizing the abuser’s perceptions of these systems and a sense of guilt (Sanchez et al., 2019). The very nature of the trauma bond perpetuates the survivor’s physical, mental, and emotional exploitation at the hands of a trafficker.

**Study Significance**

Despite its impact on the survivor’s safety, self-image, utilization of services, cooperation with law enforcement, and other matters central to the survivor’s well-being, the development of trauma bonds between sex trafficking victims and traffickers still number among the known, but patently understudied, consequences of sex trafficking (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015). Not only is addressing trauma bonds critical to sex trafficking survivors’ ability to break free and stay free but prior studies have established the need for research on trauma bonds, specific to sex trafficking. As a start to addressing this research gap, the authors of this article conducted a scoping review of research on trauma bonds in sex trafficked victims.

A scoping review is “a form of knowledge synthesis that addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area or field by systematically searching, selecting and synthesizing existing knowledge” (Colquhoun et al., 2014, p. 1291). Scoping reviews are performed when the purpose of the review is to identify and analyze research gaps, to clarify key concepts or definitions in the literature, to identify key characteristics or factors related to a concept, and to examine how research is conducted on a certain topic or field (Munn et al., 2018). The authors followed guidelines from research experts on scoping reviews to conduct this review (e.g., Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Colquhoun et al., 2014; Levac et al., 2010; Munn et al., 2018). This scoping review aims to (a) examine the research gaps regarding trauma bonds in sex trafficking situations, (b) explore how trauma bonds have been conceptualized or defined with regard to sex trafficking, and (c) describe the key characteristics or factors of trauma bonding in sex trafficking survivors.

**Theories on Trauma Bonding Between Sex Traffickers and Survivors**

Several theories have been proposed to explain how trauma bonds are generated between a victim and an abuser. The authors will briefly review two categories of theories of trauma bonding as applied to situations of sex trafficking to offer a framework for understanding how this problem develops.

**Neurobiological and developmental theories of trauma bonding.**

Trauma bonding has been theorized from an evolutionary, biological perspective. In this perspective, the goal of trauma bonding is survival, and trauma bonds are the outcome of instinctive survival or coping mechanisms being triggered by the conditions of isolation, helplessness, and kindness toward the victim by the abuser (Reid et al., 2013). Cantor and Price...
worldviews; the perpetrator is idealized, and the victim "takes dependent on the perpetrator, internalizing the perpetrator's trauma bonding. In place of self, the victim then becomes self through persistent, inescapable abuse is fundamental to as low self-worth.

Due to the heightened need for others' love and approval as well [49x200]legs that the trafficker has complete control over (Reid, 2016). This may account for survivors acknowledging that their traffickers have treated them poorly in many respects (cognitive actions occurring in the neomammalian parts of the brain) but still maintaining affection for the trafficker, seeking to return to the trafficker, or having great difficulty leaving the trafficker (instinctive survival responses occurring in the reptilian and paleomammalian regions). This echoes Summit’s (1983) findings on children’s attachment to perpetrators in the context of sexual abuse, where he proposed that in the face of the lack of protection, children will accept the situation and accommodate the continuing abuse in order to survive.

Sex-differentiated biological responses to trauma may make women more likely to be affected by trauma bonding (Contreras et al., 2017). Women may respond to trauma with an increased need for social connections for protection (David & Lyons-Ruth, 2005; Taylor et al., 2000), increasing their vulnerability to becoming attached to the perpetrator, especially in situations of social isolation where the perpetrator is the only available person to bond with or the most powerful person to bond with.

Psychosocial theories of trauma bonding: Dutton and Painter (1981, 1993) postulated that trauma bonding occurs through the same psychological mechanisms as in attachment, where trauma bonding parallels the anxious-avoidant pattern of infant attachment documented by Bowlby (1980). The intermittent provision of care intensifies attachment (Bowlby, 1977, as cited in Dutton & Painter, 1993); traffickers often display intermittent care in the form of gifts, shows of affection, and privileges that the trafficker has complete control over (Reid, 2016). Those with a preoccupied attachment pattern (Henderson et al., 2005) also may be more vulnerable to trauma bonding, possibly due to the heightened need for others' love and approval as well as low self-worth.

Herman (1992) suggested that the deterioration of a sense of self through persistent, inescapable abuse is fundamental to trauma bonding. In place of self, the victim then becomes dependent on the perpetrator, internalizing the perpetrator's worldviews; the perpetrator is idealized, and the victim “takes on” the blame and guilt of any toxicity or exploitation in the relationship while seeking to please the perpetrator (Dutton & Painter, 1981, 1993; Herman, 1992). Research on traffickers’ strategies for gaining control over their victims and making their victims dependent on them reflect the deliberate tactics that replace the victims’ sense of self with the traffickers’ values, needs, viewpoints, and permitted roles in the relationship (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015; Reid, 2016).

Other researchers have explored the cognitive distortions that are often held by victims in trauma bonds. Graham et al. (1994) suggested that the misinterpretation of emotional arousal experienced during traumatic events is the most basic source of a trauma bond. In this misinterpretation, the victim interprets the terror generated by the trauma as “love” (Graham et al., 1994). This is the key misattribution without which the trauma bond would not form and remains intact as long as the misattribution is held by the victim (Graham et al., 1994). Learned helplessness regarding resistance and escape (Seligman, 1975; Walker, 2009) and self-blame for the perpetrator’s acts of abuse (Lerner & Montada, 1998) are also core cognitive distortions that cause a victim to appease the offender and contribute to the perception that the offender is the only person who accepts or wants them and will stay with them. Exposure of the trafficker’s acts of abuse becomes tantamount to betrayal of the trafficker. The reluctance of survivors to prosecute their traffickers or testify against them due to love or a sense of bonding has been noted in the literature (Gerassi & Nichols, 2018; Hanna, 2002).

Relational-Cultural theory (RCT), which focuses on the central role of relationship in well-being, is another psychosocial theory that provides a useful way of understanding trauma bonding. RCT was developed beginning in the late 1970s when four counselors began meeting informally and discussing critiques of existing theories that pathologized many qualities women tend to exhibit (Jordan, 2017). Rooted in feminist ideology, these women began to develop a theory that posits that human beings are wired for connection and that disconnection is the ultimate source of human suffering and pathology (Jordan, 2017). Trauma bonding is essentially a form of relationship, or connection, so this theory is abundantly relevant. They argued that connections are so vital to our survival and well-being that the pain of disconnection is as alarming as physical injury, demonstrated in both neurological and behavioral research (Jordan, 2017).

Relational-Cultural researchers have established that human beings, and specifically females more so than males, seem to seek sources of connection to cope with pain and to enhance survival in threatening circumstances (Jordan, 2017). This could help provide insight into the puzzling nature of trauma bonds. Through the lens of RCT, the presence of some connection (or at least the illusion of it) is of such value that connection even with an abusive or exploitative individual is superior to no connection at all. Therefore, for a trafficking victim, connection with her trafficker—who is arguably the main source of her suffering—is still better than complete disconnection. Often for sex trafficking victims, their trafficker or pimp is the main source of human…
interaction that is consistent, and this individual might be responsible for meeting some of their basic needs such as food or shelter. Experiencing ongoing physical and sexual violence and other various forms of stress and trauma, the sex trafficking victim is desperate for connection as a means to cope and survive. Therefore, they may feel connected to their trafficker, despite the abuse, violence, and exploitation.

**Method**

**Article Collection**

One important quality of the scoping review method is to identify all relevant literature regardless of study design (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). Therefore, this review includes both empirical studies and conceptual and theoretical papers. The details of the article collection are outlined below.

**Information sources.** The primary information source for this review was electronic databases. The authors did not have the capacity to utilize other information sources at the time of this review, such as contact with study authors, trial registers, or gray literature. The electronic databases were searched between September 2019 and May 2020. The specific databases included were all a part of EBSCO Host, and the names are as follows: Academic Source Complete, Gender Studies Database, MEDLINE, MEDLINE with Full Text, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsychINFO, Public Affairs Index, Social Services Abstracts (H.W. Wilson), Social Work Abstracts, SocINDEX with Full Text, Sociological Collection, and Women’s Studies International. In addition to obtaining articles through these databases, additional articles were found through the process of reference harvesting.

**Search strategy.** Within the databases described above, the following search terms were used: trauma bonding, trauma-coerced bond, trauma-coerced attachment, and trauma bonding theory. Additionally, these terms were searched using the Boolean AND alongside the term “sex trafficking.” Sex trafficking was also searched using the Boolean AND alongside the terms Stockholm syndrome, attachment, coercion, and manipulation. Only articles published since 2013 were examined since the previous review mentioned earlier was published in 2013 (Reid et al., 2013). Covidence was used for abstract and full-text screening, and Mendeley was used to store articles.

**Selection process.** Before articles were found and selected, the research team met to discuss specific parameters on what literature would be included based on the focus of this review (Levac et al., 2010). Specifically, foreign language material was excluded because of the cost and time involved in translating material. This of course means that relevant and helpful articles could have been missed. Additionally, other inclusion criteria included that the article needed to focus on sex trafficking victims (or their traffickers/pimps), the article needed to focus on a Western country, and the article needed to address trauma bonding and/or psychological coercion from the perspective of either the trafficking victim or trafficker or the article sought to define or conceptualize trauma bonding. Using these criteria and searching for articles published since 2013, 37 abstracts were screened, 14 full-text articles were reviewed, and eight additional articles were found from reference harvesting. A total of 15 articles were selected for the final review (see Figure 1 for detail). These articles are marked with an asterisk in the reference list.

**Data Collection and Synthesis**

Of the articles that were selected, the overwhelming majority were qualitative studies \((n = 9)\). The others were conceptual \((n = 2)\), reviews \((n = 2)\), theoretical \((n = 1)\), and a case study \((n = 1)\). The process for examining and synthesizing these articles is described below.

**Charting the data.** Each article was read at least twice by more than one reviewer (Levac et al., 2010), and key information
was extracted and organized in a table to enable easy comparison (see Table 1). The authors, year of publication, location of the study, purpose or focus of the article, research design, sample, methods, and results are reported for each article. One study was conducted in Canada (Morselli & Savoie-Gargiso, 2014), and the rest of the articles are from the United States. Although we did not specify gender in the search criteria, the majority of the qualitative studies involved female sex trafficking victims as participants (n = 5) and others examined pimps or traffickers directly (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017; Morselli & Savoie-Gargiso, 2014; Stalans & Finns, 2019) as well as the service providers engaging with victims (Hom & Woods, 2013; Reid, 2016). None of the studies discussed male sex trafficking victims. Of the studies that examined victims of sex trafficking, only one focused on adult victims (Sukach et al., 2018); the rest were focused on minors (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Hargreaves-Cormany & Patterson, 2016; Hopper, 2017; Reid, 2016).

Results
Five key aspects emerged regarding the phenomenon of trauma bonding in victims of sex trafficking. Additionally, efforts were made to help define and conceptualize what a trauma bond is and how it develops (see Table 2).

Definitions and Characteristics of Trauma Bonding

Definitions. Trauma bonding was defined in 10 of the reviewed studies (Contreras et al., 2017; Hardy et al., 2013; Hom & Woods, 2013; Hopper, 2017; J. Jordan et al., 2013; Lopez & Minassians, 2018; Mehlman-Orozco, 2017; Raghavan & Doychak, 2015; Reid, 2016; Sanchez et al., 2019). Examples of these definitions included “the invisible strong emotional tie that develops between two individuals, where one person frequently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses or intimidates the other person” (Hopper, 2017, as cited in Sanchez et al., 2019, p. 49), “a dynamic, cyclical state in which victims form a powerful emotional attachment to their abuse partners” (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015, p. 583), “a paradoxical psychological phenomenon in which a positive bond between hostage and captor occurs” (Anmitto, 2011, as cited in Lopez & Minassians, 2018, p. 264), and “a form of coercive control in which the perpetrator instills in the victim fear as well as gratitude for being allowed to live” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., as cited in Jordan et al., 2013, p. 361).

Two studies used the terminology “trauma coercive bonding” or “trauma coercive attachment” in place of “trauma bonding” in sex trafficking survivors (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015; Sanchez et al., 2019). Raghavan and Doychak (2015) proposed that “trauma bonding” be reframed as “trauma-coerced bonding” to more adequately reflect the abusive dynamics between a trafficked individual and the trafficker, where the bond is conceptualized as “a traumatic response to a terrifying chronic stressor rather than as a dysfunctional attachment that reflects masochism, weakness, or social vulnerability in the victim” (p. 584). While Raghavan and Doychak argued for the substitution of terminology to foreground the complex consequences of chronic interpersonal trauma, Sanchez et al. (2019) argued for a theoretical distinction between trauma-coerced bonding and trauma bonding, particularly for juvenile victims of sex trafficking, based on research that trauma bonding in sex trafficking may be more complex than in other forms of victimization (e.g., Hopper, 2017). They noted that with trauma bonding of incest or domestic violence victims (e.g., Adorjan et al., 2012) or Stockholm syndrome (Cantor & Price, 2007), a bi-directionality or reciprocity of sentiment exists where the abusers or captors develop positive feelings for the victims they abuse, even mislabeling their abuse as “love” (Sanchez et al., 2019). They contrasted this with the “coercive” unidirectional bonding between traffickers and trafficked individuals that is deliberately cultivated for the purpose of profit without affection for the victim.

Four studies used “trauma bonding” synonymously with “Stockholm syndrome,” defining trauma bonding in terms of the attachment between captors and captives (Hardy et al., 2013; Hopper, 2017; J. Jordan et al., 2013; Lopez & Minassians, 2018), reflecting Reid et al.’s (2013) comment that the term most associated with trauma bonding is the Stockholm syndrome. Other terminologies that have been used interchangeably with or to refer to similar consequences from prolonged or inescapable interpersonal trauma such as “brainwashing” (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998) and traumatic entrapment (Cantor & Price, 2007) were not used in the studies to define or as synonyms with trauma bonding.

Characteristics. In several of the articles, the authors described the paradox present in the victim’s relationship to the trafficker which helps the trauma bond to form. Traffickers seem to alternate positive and negative behavior, which strengthens the victim’s attachment; authors described this as the “use of reward and punishment, acceptance and degradation” (Jordan et al., 2013, p. 361), “intermittency of punishment and reward” (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015, p. 583), “acts of kindness alternated with physical violence and/or psychological coercion” (Contreras et al., 2017, p. 35), “alternate threats and violence with occasional indulgences and acts of kindness” (Hopper, 2017, p. 162), and “increasing intermittent brutal and seductive behavior” (Sanchez et al., 2019, p. 50).

Related to this paradox in the trafficker’s actions, authors also described the contradictory emotions victims seem to feel toward their traffickers. Specifically, the authors described a “dysfunctional attachment” (Hardy et al., 2013, p. 11), “intense loyalty” (Jordan et al., 2013, p. 361; Raghavan & Doychak, 2015, p. 585), victims being “brainwashed” and having a “significant bond” (Hom & Woods, 2013, p. 77), appearing as a “willing victim” (Reid, 2016, p. 505), “cognitive and emotional manipulation” (Sanchez et al., 2019, p. 52), “dependency, but also love, admiration, gratefulness” (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015, p. 584), “love and idolization” (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015, p. 586), “indebtedness, grateful for any
Table 1. Articles for Review.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors and Location</th>
<th>Research Question/Purpose/ Focus of the Study</th>
<th>Research Design</th>
<th>Sample/Data Source</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cecchet &amp; Thoburn (2014) Washington State</td>
<td>To better understand factors comprising the resiliency of young women who have survived the sex trade within the United States.</td>
<td>Qualitative study: Qualitative interviews using narrative analysis within an ecological systems model.</td>
<td>Six females who had experienced sex trafficking prior to the age of 18.</td>
<td>Being in love with the trafficker created initial vulnerability to trafficking and continued exploitation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contreras et al. (2017) Massachusetts</td>
<td>To review the psychological experiences of trafficked people, the relational consequences of human trafficking, and clinical vignettes of the authors’ work with trafficked women at the Cambridge Health Alliance.</td>
<td>Case studies: Literature review and case vignettes.</td>
<td>Three clinical vignettes are described.</td>
<td>Trafficker’s psychological coercion that exploits social scripts of romance, friendship, or family creates shame and mistrust; healing involves facilitating survivor’s restoration of humanity and dignity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardy et al. (2013) North Carolina</td>
<td>To survey professional literature to identify barriers to service for domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) victims, highlight specific mental needs of this population, and propose direction for future research.</td>
<td>Review of literature.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Survivors need help to address trauma bonding with traffickers. Specialized services and assessment practices that are trauma-informed are critical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hargreaves-Cormany &amp; Patterson (2016) Virginia</td>
<td>Research questions: How do sex trafficking juvenile (STJ) survivors perceive and make meaning of their experience in sex trafficking? What are the conditional probabilities of increase in substance use, type of motivation to testify, and type of caretaker as the primary guardian for the STJ survivor as a child given latent class membership? What predicts membership into the specific latent classes?</td>
<td>Qualitative study: Qualitative analysis, interviews, and latent class analysis/</td>
<td>One hundred seventy-nine survivors in cases involving the sex trafficking of juveniles that were adjudicated from 1990 to 2011. Three interviews of survivors were included in the qualitative analysis.</td>
<td>Survivors typically have insecure attachment, expressed a need for belongingness, and love/attention; traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities through charismatic persuasion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hom &amp; Woods (2013) Ohio</td>
<td>To describe the experiences of trauma and its aftermath for women who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation as told by frontline service providers.</td>
<td>Qualitative study: Qualitative research design via in-person interviews, analyzed using thematic analysis.</td>
<td>Six frontline service providers consisting of nurses, clinical directors, anti-trafficking task force members, social workers, and anti-trafficking program developers.</td>
<td>Participants described the controlling behaviors of trafficking while they were being trafficked, leading to trauma bonding, entrapment, and continued exploitation.</td>
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<td>Hopper (2017) Massachusetts</td>
<td>To explore the histories and experiences of polyvictimization of minor victims of sex trafficking, the trauma that occurs within the trafficking situation itself, and the developmental trauma adaptations described by these victims.</td>
<td>Qualitative study: Qualitative analysis.</td>
<td>Thirty-two youth who were sex trafficked as minors. These participants were randomly selected from the charts of trafficked youth who received services from a program called Project REACH between 2009 and 2014.</td>
<td>Participants described how traffickers who posed as romantic partners alternated abuse and kindness and made false promises of a better life, marriage, and money.</td>
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Table 1. (continued)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J. Jordan et al. (2013) Florida</td>
<td>To review literature on DMST in the United States for problems in addressing DMST and make recommendations for changes to current practices and policies at the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels.</td>
<td>Review of literature.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Among other problems noted, traffickers deliberately use trauma bonds as a control strategy. There is a lack of effective intervention modalities specific to sex trafficking victims.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lopez &amp; Minassians (2018) California</td>
<td>To develop a theoretical model to help explain the sexual trafficking of juveniles.</td>
<td>Discussion of theory: Parsonian functionalism used to integrate sociological, criminological, and psychological theories to develop a theoretical model.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>The adolescent brain (desire to please, impressionable, poor decision making, and low impulse control) is vulnerable to the Stockholm syndrome involving a sex trafficker (charismatic, uncaring, violent, and controlling). Participants predominantly use deception and fraud to build trauma bonds with victims for control more frequently than they use force.</td>
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<td>Mehlman-Orozco (2017) Michigan</td>
<td>To gather insight on the identities (projected and self-identified) and criminal subculture of sex traffickers to provide a better framework for understanding the clandestine nature of sex trafficking crimes.</td>
<td>Qualitative study: Qualitative interviews.</td>
<td>Data were drawn from a 2-year police investigation of a network of pimps and prostitutes in Montreal. The network matrix was made up of 142 participants including pimps, prostitutes, new recruits, chauffeurs, and clients.</td>
<td>Traffickers were aware of the importance of satisfying prostitutes’ needs, promoting loyalty, providing moments of intimacy, threats, and promises in order to maintain control.</td>
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<td>Morselli &amp; Savoie-Gargiso (2014) Montreal</td>
<td>To analyze relationships between pimps and sex workers using a conceptual model of research sharing that focuses on the requisites necessary for optimal transactions within an illicit enterprise.</td>
<td>Qualitative study: Social network analysis study using secondary data from police surveillance.</td>
<td>Data were drawn from a 2-year police investigation of a network of pimps and prostitutes in Montreal. The network matrix was made up of 142 participants including pimps, prostitutes, new recruits, chauffeurs, and clients.</td>
<td>Traffickers were aware of the importance of satisfying prostitutes’ needs, promoting loyalty, providing moments of intimacy, threats, and promises in order to maintain control.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raghavan &amp; Doychak (2015) New York</td>
<td>To offer an explanation of “trauma-coerced attachment” and provide the theoretical underpinnings for furthering our understanding of this traumatic outcome within sex-trafficking contexts.</td>
<td>Discussion of concepts and theories.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Trauma bonding should be reconceptualized as “trauma-coerced attachment” to highlight how it is the result of the trauma of chronic coercive control.</td>
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<td>Reid (2016) Florida</td>
<td>To advance understanding of the tactics employed by sex traffickers to recruit or initially entrap U.S. minors, to identify tactics of sex traffickers and/or specific circumstances that facilitate prolonged or repeated exploitation and prevent youth from exiting, and to apply the crime script approach to juvenile sex trafficking to inform prevention.</td>
<td>Qualitative study: An exploratory multi-case study design using purposive sampling with cross-validation was used for this study.</td>
<td>Data were drawn from the review of case files of 43 trafficked girls gathered from social service agencies. Additionally, service providers were interviewed to gain insight regarding sex trafficker’s entrapment and exploitation tactics.</td>
<td>Sex traffickers deliberately create trauma bonds through romance scripts, friendship or faux family scripts, threats of forced abortion or taking away children, and coerced co-offending.</td>
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attention and affection they receive despite the abuse” (Hopper, 2017, p. 162), and “an invisible strong emotional tie” (Sanchez et al., 2019, p. 51).

Several of the articles also expounded on key factors that tend to be present when a trauma bond forms. Authors discussed the presence of a “marked power imbalance” (Reid, 2016, p. 505), “longevity of interaction or some type of interpersonal relationship” (Lopez & Minassians, 2018, p. 265), “abusive control dynamics” (including physical or sexual abuse, humiliation, dehumanization, vague or unpredictable threats, harassment, intimidation, etc.) and “terrifying chronic stressors” (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015, pp. 583–584), and “inescapability (real or perceived) of the situation and isolation, especially from perspectives other than those of the abuser” (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015, p. 585).

Overall, trauma bonding was defined in terms of an imbalance of power as well as affection between a trafficker and their victim that keeps the victim entrapped, and trauma bonds were characterized by severe power imbalances, intermittent brutal and kind behaviors, isolation, perceived inability to escape, and internalization of abuser’s viewpoints. While Reid et al. (2013) noted a lack of a universally accepted definition or diagnostic criteria addressed by the clinical or academic field, the definitions and descriptions given in the studies were largely similar, with the sole exception of Sanchez et al.’s (2019) theoretical distinction between “trauma bonding” and “trauma-coerced bonding.”

Aspects

**Victim’s history of abuse.** One dominant aspect that emerged from the literature on trauma bonding was the relationship between susceptibility to trauma bonding with victims’ past experiences of abuse and exploitation. Several authors commented on the prevalence of childhood abuse and neglect in the population of sex trafficking victims (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Hargreaves-Cormany & Patterson, 2016; Hom & Woods, 2013; Jordan et al., 2013). Some of these authors attempted to explain why

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Authors and Location</th>
<th>Research Question/Purpose/ Focus of the Study</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sanchez et al. (2019). New Jersey and Alabama</td>
<td>To define and clarify the future concept of trauma-coerced bonding from trauma bonding as it relates to commercial sexual exploitation of children victimization.</td>
<td>Review: Concept analysis. N/A. This concept analysis used Rodgers’ evolutionary method to search four databases (PubMed, CINHAL, Scopus, and Google Scholar [for gray literature]), using terms associated with various descriptions of trauma bonding (for instance, Stockholm Syndrome), resulting in 20 articles for review.</td>
<td>Trauma-coercive bonding results in interrupted development, maladaptive coping, adoption of the trafficker’s worldview, and loss of identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stalans &amp; Finn (2019) Illinois</td>
<td>To provide a better understanding of how family socialization, prior experience as a sex worker, living in disadvantaged or advantaged neighborhoods, and having a current legitimate job contributes to the degree and severity of pimps’ coerciveness toward sex workers.</td>
<td>Qualitative study: Qualitative study using in-person interviews. Forty-two active pimps and two male drivers, contacted through placing advertisements on Backpage and via referral from other pimps.</td>
<td>Type and degree of coercion between trafficker and trafficked person depended on the trafficker’s background. College-educated pimps, pimps operating business with fees of at least US$300, and those from “decent” families were more likely to use a noncoercive model of management. Participants’ feelings toward traffickers were complex despite the abuse, being on a continuum of love to hate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sukach et al. (2018) Texas</td>
<td>To explore the experiences of female survivors of sex trafficking using the following questions: (1) What are the experiences of female survivors of human trafficking within the industry? and (2) How do survivors make sense of those experiences?</td>
<td>Qualitative study: The authors used a phenomenological approach to analyze stories of survivors and identify themes that described the lived experiences of female survivors of sex trafficking. The stories of 15 female survivors of sex trafficking available on equalitynow.org. This was purposive sample stories were from 12 different countries and were chosen for their lengthy discussion of personal experiences.</td>
<td>Participants’ feelings toward traffickers were complex despite the abuse, being on a continuum of love to hate.</td>
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had. One participant stated: victims, rape was the first sexual encounter these women ever providers they interviewed reported that among many trafficking (Contreras et al., 2017; Hopper, 2017; Jordan et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2019). Hom and Woods (2013) explained that this connection exists. These negative childhood experiences put women at greater risk of being vulnerable to traffickers’ tactics as they are struggling with low self-esteem, feeling a strong need for love and belonging, often have difficulty establishing healthy relationships with clear boundaries, and have confusion about what constitutes kindness, safety, and love (Contreras et al., 2017; Hopper, 2017; Jordan et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2019). Hom and Woods (2013) explained that the sexual abuse in particular plays a strong role. Service providers they interviewed reported that among many trafficking victims, rape was the first sexual encounter these women ever had. One participant stated:

I can tell you the majority of people that I’ve seen when you talk to them about their family history or background, there’s been issues. So they may have issues at home . . . so then this trafficker comes and makes you feel special or shows you some attention, a lot of these women I’ve seen become vulnerable targets. (Hom & Woods, 2013, p. 77)

The victims themselves offered similar sentiments. Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) found that in their sample of sex trafficking survivors, vulnerability to being recruited was one of the most talked about concepts, and all participants described a yearning to be loved that was connected to their childhood abuse experiences and lack of a father figure. Participant B in their sample said,

My father was never there, and being raised in that environment, you really didn’t have all your needs met. I remember [my pimp] bought me a leather coat. He was the first person who ever bought me something like that, so that was one way for me to really trust and believe him. . . . A lot of us have low self-worth and low self-esteem. We were just looking for love, everybody wants love. I think if you don’t understand what love is, you look for it in the wrong places, and men know that. (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014, pp. 486–487)

Often because of their exposure to abusive experiences at a young age, women were confused about relationship dynamics and mistakenly believed that “in order to be loved, they must allow themselves to be subjected to daily violence, as well as emotional, physical, and sexual abuse” (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014, p. 490). Hargreaves-Cormany and Patterson (2016) further explained that the experience of having had multiple caregivers as a child (perhaps as a result of being in the foster care system) contributes to the experience of insecure attachment among these women, and this lack of a secure base brings increased vulnerability to later being exploited or trafficked.

**Victim’s distortion of love.** As previously discussed in the definition of trauma bonding, a key element of trauma bonding is the victim’s feelings of love and affection toward the perpetrator. This is the second aspect that emerged from the literature. Authors commented on how victims disclosed that they are in love with their traffickers, desire to please them, idolize them, and feel obligated to them (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015; Reid, 2016). Reid (2016) found that several young victims who had reported that their traffickers were “very abusive” also reported that they loved them. Traffickers are skilled at making each victim feel special; saying things like “you and I are the only ones who understand each other and what we have been through” (Reid, 2016, p. 504). The intermittent abuse and acts of kindness create confusion in victims. One victim discussed this in Sukach et al.’s (2018) study:

His earlier promises of love and a future together were now followed by beatings, rapes and humiliation. There was no way back for me. He was the only person I had in this world and I didn’t want to lose him. After all, I loved him. (p. 1429)

This love of a trafficker also results in feelings of jealousy between women working under the same man. Morselli and Savoie-Gargiso (2014) discussed how they observed jealousy and competition for the pimp’s attention in their sample, and the women would each refer to the pimp as their boyfriend. Even well after the abuse has ended and victims have escaped their trafficking situation, this trauma bond can persist. One victim interviewed by Hopper (2017) recalled that when her trafficker contacted her, she had mixed emotions:
I was worried. At first, I missed him. Then I was worried that he’d go shoot at our house. I was scared. And sad. I missed him… I liked him. (p. 169)

Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) found similar sentiments among the survivors they studied:

I met this guy, he was particularly interested in me, asking me questions and appeared to be worried about me and my situation, saying how beautiful I was, and how we was gonna make everything okay. He has this nice car and nice jewelry, nice clothes, nice everything. I was kind of into him, and he turned out to be a pimp. And that’s how I got involved. I was still looking for that approval from somebody. I loved him and he was like a boyfriend, but he was also like a father. I still love him, I always stick up for him, even today when people talk about him. I always stick up for him. (p. 487)

Victim’s protection of trafficker. The third aspect that emerged from the literature is connected to the victims’ distortion of love. Due to their conflicted and confused emotions, victims also protect their trafficker from being held accountable. Several authors commented on how victims of sex trafficking will often refuse to testify against their trafficker, will not cooperate in efforts to prosecute traffickers, and will deny their traffickers’ activities are crimes (Hardy et al., 2013; Raghavan & Doychak, 2015; Sanchez et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this contributes to the misidentification of victims of sex trafficking as victims do not identify themselves as being victims, are taught to fear authorities, are viewed as being complicit in their abuse or trafficking due to their refusal to cooperate, and overall do not present as an “ideal” or stereotypical victim since they feel compelled to protect the very person who inflicted the trauma (Hardy et al., 2013; Jordan et al., 2013; Raghavan & Doychak, 2015). Reid (2016) highlighted one example of this in her study as one 13-year-old sex trafficking victim explained that she felt guilty for getting her trafficker arrested, claiming he never abused her and expressing that she was sad she lost him as a friend.

Trafficker intent to coerce and control. A final aspect that emerged from the articles reviewed was the intent and strategy of traffickers in creating trauma bonds with victims. It seems evident from the literature that the phenomenon of trauma bonding does not occur spontaneously but instead is the result of specific, strategic behaviors on the part of traffickers with the goal of manipulating victims (Hom & Woods, 2013). Specifically, authors of these articles commented on how traffickers are aware of victims’ vulnerability (discussed above) and seek to exploit the victims’ desires for love, protection, and family (Contreras et al., 2017; Hardy et al., 2013). Traffickers know how to look for women who come from unstable environments or dysfunctional families, who are struggling with low self-esteem, who are socially isolated, and who crave a sense of belongingness (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Jordan et al., 2013; Raghavan & Doychak, 2015). Once they have identified such vulnerable targets, traffickers then intentionally introduce a romantic element, seeking to present themselves as empathetic and compassionate boyfriends, fostering a relationship built on dependency (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Raghavan & Doychak, 2015; Reid, 2016). They prey on these women’s vulnerabilities and attachment issues, pretending to offer love, safety, attention, and a better life, and are skilled at making each individual woman feel special and unique (Raghavan & Doychak, 2015; Reid, 2016).

Morselli and Savoie-Gargiso (2014) explained in their study how the mother of two particular pimps in Montreal encouraged her sons to intentionally create moments of intimacy with each prostitute they were managing. She also spoke to some of the women herself, seeking to promote the distortion that the pimps loved them; later returning to tell her sons in one case,

I brainwashed her for you. (Morselli & Savoie-Gargiso, 2014, p. 257)

Mehlman-Orozco (2017) discussed this strategy with the convicted sex traffickers he interviewed and was told by one trafficker,

I [was] actually training, shaping, and molding their worldview and opinion… a cunning person is very capable of making the other person believe that she is in control, concealing their intentions until they lead the person to the edge of the cliff. (p. 11)

Another trafficker in this study reported:

I love everything about a woman… She needs a pimp to guide her, love her, and protect her… The pimp is the father she never had or the brother she misses, a hoe was put on earth to be pimped by a pimp, without him there’s no her. (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017, p. 15)

Stalans and Finn (2019) found in their study that falsely proclaiming love was the most prominent strategy used by traffickers to recruit women. Out of the pimps and traffickers they interviewed, 34.1% admitted that they use love as a tool to manipulate women into prostitution (Stalans & Finn, 2019). One of the pimps interviewed by Mehlman-Orozco (2017) explained that he went to great lengths to make his victims feel “loved” and important;

I spent a lot of time with [Victim 2], took her on vacations, took her shopping… I had an ongoing relationship with her for over two years. (p. 13)

Another pimp indicated that he had even read a book to learn how to use love to manipulate;

See the girls kinda fall in love with you, you know, like the… Stockholm syndrome… you ever read the, uh, Art of Love? The less you give, the more they want… you gotta control their mind… it’s a psychological game. (Stalans & Finn, 2019, p. 4510)

In addition to using love, other strategies discussed in the literature included showing affection; buying food, clothes,
jewelry, and other gifts; reinforcing a loss of identity and control through the distribution of new ID cards and driver’s licenses; creating a “family” atmosphere (including forcing victims to call the trafficker “daddy”), isolating victims, instilling fear of law enforcement; introducing substance use; and normalizing sex (i.e., through exposure to pornography; Hom & Woods, 2013; Hopper, 2017; Jordan et al., 2013; Reid, 2016). Another element at play is the presence of children in the relationship between a victim and her trafficker. Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) found that all of the domestic minor sex trafficking victims they interviewed had a child with either their pimp or drug dealer and often this was used against them to control them with fear. Raghavan and Doychak (2015) noted that traffickers employ many of the same coercive control tactics as perpetrators of intimate partner violence, using micro-regulation, surveillance, threats, intimidation, humiliation, and isolation across domains of finances, children, dress, employment, family, and friends.

**Discussion**

Trauma bonds perpetuate survivors’ physical, mental, and emotional victimization and exploitation, impacting survivors’ safety and well-being, participation in legal processes, and utilization of services and other resources. This study therefore set out to examine the research gaps regarding trauma bonds in sex trafficking situations, to explore how trauma bonds have been conceptualized or defined with regard to sex trafficking, and to describe the key aspects or factors of trauma bonding in sex trafficking situations.

The literature reviewed revealed that trauma bonding is a troubling and rampant issue harming many victims of sex trafficking. The articles reviewed provide helpful insight toward a consistent definition of trauma bonding, and the four aspects identified further increase our understanding of this phenomenon. The four aspects were victim history of abuse, victim’s distortion of love, victim’s protection of trafficker, and trafficker intent to coerce and control. Much of the literature examined in this scoping review supports points made in Reid et al.’s (2013) earlier review: traffickers’ intentional manipulation of victims’ emotions; traffickers’ use of isolation, physical and sexual violence, and control; traffickers’ pattern of alternating kindness and abuse; traffickers’ posing as boyfriends or romantic partners; the vulnerability of children to be exploited; and the tendency of victims to seek attachment in the midst of suffering.

Among the theories of trauma bonding noted earlier in this article, RCT seems to offer the most comprehensive explanation for the findings of this review. A victim’s preexisting vulnerability to forming a trauma bond with a perpetrator due to prior abuse or neglect can be understood in terms of RCT’s emphasis on connection as a survival need: Someone who has experienced chronic disconnection throughout life would be even more desperate for connection, even one that comes at the price of exploitation. As RCT theorist Judith Jordan (2017) stated, “the pain of isolation and exclusion alter us and push us to seek connection for our very survival” (p. 237). Quotes by participants in the reviewed articles often reflected this desire for connection at all costs. A trafficker’s intent to form a bond with a victim also relates to RCT, as it was revealed in the articles reviewed that traffickers are more often than not aware of their victims’ longings for love and connection, and they are intentionally seeking to capitalize on this need for connection as they manipulate and exploit individuals. Furthermore, one of the key trafficking strategies discussed was the use of isolation. This also accords with RCT as theorists often discuss the negative power of isolation: “isolation erodes courage . . . isolation interrupts growth . . . isolation disempowers us” (Jordan, 2017, p. 231). It is strategic for a trafficker to isolate their victims so that the trafficker becomes the victim’s only source or option for connection. Outsiders looking in often are baffled that a trafficking victim could report feelings of affection, loyalty, or love for a trafficker who has exploited and hurt her in innumerable ways. However, as opposed to the biological, cognitive psychology, or developmental theories of trauma, which are more deterministic, RCT provides a framework to understand a victim’s choices given her circumstances. The choice of relationship can be seen as rational and understandable, as opposed to entirely baffling or nonsensical.

RCT also provides a rational account for the victim’s protection of her trafficker as noted in this review and the wider body of trafficking literature. The survivor protects the trafficker in order to protect the only source of connection she has and resists new connections for the same reason. When someone has experienced disconnection, invalidating, shaming, anger, or rejection (as many trafficking victims have), they often develop “survival strategies of disconnection; keeping rejected aspects of themselves out of the relationship provides a sense of safety and lessens the overwhelming sense of vulnerability” (Jordan, 2017, p. 241). The impression of a trafficking survivor as closed off to those who are trying to help and only open to the trafficker whom she is already bonded to makes sense when one considers the strategy they are using for survival.

In addition to the aspects uncovered in the literature, RCT holds implications for the resolution of trauma bonds. RCT theorists repeatedly emphasize the role of connection in healing; “change occurs in healing relationships” (Jordan, 2017, p. 233). This is in part because, as Jordan says, “connection confers power and enables actions,” and specifically it is often when an individual has support outside the hurtful relationship that they are able to “find the means to leave the abusive relationship” (Jordan, 2017, pp. 231, 238). This highlights the importance of helping survivors foster new and healthy connections apart from their trafficker, both with peers and fellow survivors as well as with therapeutic professionals. This should be investigated further in future intervention research.

In addition to building on the earlier review (Reid et al., 2013), this scoping review expands our knowledge on trauma bonding. Specifically, the articles reviewed offer greater insight into the psychological issues present in victims who experience trauma bonding. The feelings of love and affection
for traffickers and the desire to protect traffickers from prosecution were well-illustrated in the articles included. Additionally, the connection between childhood adversity and abuse with the formation of a trauma bond as a victim of sex trafficking is an important and disconcerting new insight.

**Limitations**

While this review has many strengths and important implications, it also has limitations that are important to consider. Due to lack of time and resources, it is likely that the articles represented in this review are an incomplete retrieval of all relevant literature. Publication bias and language bias are both present as only peer-reviewed articles published in English were reviewed. Since reference harvesting was a method used to find and select articles, citation bias could also be at play since some studies are more likely to be cited than others. Since this review focused only on female sex trafficking victims in Western countries, there is a significant lack of diversity in the participants of the studies reviewed.

**Implications for Future Research**

Despite the progress that has been made by research on trauma bonding over the past 6 years, there are still gaps in our knowledge and challenges to developing further clarity. These gaps provide direction for future research. Reid and colleagues (2013) proposed that more research is needed on instruments that are effective in identifying and measuring trauma bonding, and it appears from the literature reviewed that very little progress has occurred on this front. This is still an important need that could contribute to increased identification of victims. Furthermore, there does not appear to be intervention studies seeking to examine effective practices for helping victims of sex trafficking break or sever their trauma bonds with traffickers. The severing of trauma bonds is obviously an essential component of the healing process for a sex trafficking victim, and discerning effective interventions should be a priority for researchers. This could involve the testing of current evidence-based practices or the development of new interventions. It would be important to learn from sex trafficking survivors who have successfully severed trauma bonds and replaced these with healthy attachments. Studies should be conducted to gather comprehensive and contextualized accounts of their strategies, and intervention studies based on these strategies should be designed and tested. This is a critical area for survivors to actually have a meaningful and central role in different stages of research.

The RCT with its focus on social connection as a fundamental human need, as noted earlier, provides a rational account of trauma bonding as well as a framework for identifying target areas for intervention and designing these interventions. However, the efficacy of interventions guided by the RCT is yet to be seen, and there still remains a large gap in the research to design, test, implement, and evaluate RCT-based approaches to addressing trauma bonding in sex trafficking survivors. Including the voices and experiences of survivors is critical in translational research, particularly on matters as intimate, impactful, and emotionally salient as trauma bonding; one important stage in exploring the practical import of RCT would be to explore whether survivors themselves find RCT to provide a meaningful way of understanding their experiences of trauma bonding and whether these survivors see potential in the intervention targets and strategies suggested by RCT.

While trafficking is a prosecutable crime, victims are often reluctant to testify against their traffickers (Nichols & Heil, 2014). Other reasons for this reluctance exist besides trauma bonding: fear of retaliation, fear of loss of child support from trafficker, threats of violence to survivor or family member, fear of deportation (if survivors are undocumented), fear of the stigma of being identified as a “sex trafficking victim,” mistrust of law enforcement and the legal system, and fear of own criminal activity being exposed and so forth (Gerassi & Nichols, 2018). Future research should explore how trauma bonding interacts with these other concerns for a better understanding of the complex picture of why trafficking victims often do not prosecute their traffickers. Such knowledge will pave the way to improve interventions for this issue and improve the likelihood that survivors will be able to benefit from victim protection laws, including obtaining restitution from their traffickers.

Large gaps in knowledge regarding trauma bonding itself remain. Notably, this review revealed the lack of diversity lens, cultural or otherwise, applied in current research on trauma bonding in sex trafficking survivors. While several of the reviewed studies reported the age, gender orientation, and ethnic identities of participants, these studies did not explore how these demographics affect trauma bonding, its manifestation, and recovery from it. Further study of trauma bonding should explore how various sociocultural categories or identities impact the development and severing of trauma bonds in order to inform interventions and enhance theories of trauma bonding. Additionally, future research should examine how trauma bonding might differ in cases of familial trafficking as opposed to other forms of sex trafficking. It is likely that there are important differences since familial trafficking would involve bonds that are more intimate from an attachment perspective, but studies up to this point have not examined these dynamics in regard to trauma bonding.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

In addition to directions for future research, the findings of this scoping review provide implications for policy and practice with sex trafficking victims. Legislators who are drafting laws regarding the prosecution of traffickers or protection of victims must take into consideration the common presence of a trauma bond between a victim and her trafficker. The victim’s affection for and idealization of the trafficker, as well as her desire to shield him from prosecution, may cause the victim to give the false impression that she is a willing,
compotent, and fully consensual partner to her exploitation. Law enforcement officials also need to be educated on this concept and trained on how to effectively respond to these situations with sensitivity and awareness. Practitioners working with victims who have exited their trafficking situations also need adequate training and resources on how to understand and help victims who are still attached to their traffickers. The fundamental need for social connection or attachment discussed in this review implies that strong and quality social connections should be a part of programming for survivors. More efforts should be made to fund and design mentoring programs for survivors. Finally, it will be important for a concise and agreed-upon definition of trauma bonding to be disseminated, preferably with specific diagnostic criteria that could be included in an updated version of the DSM-5. These efforts would greatly improve relevant systems’ response to the presence of trauma bonding in sex trafficking survivors.

Conclusion

Sex trafficking is a public health problem that continues to affect women and children around the world. Trauma bonding between sex trafficking victims and their traffickers is a prevalent but misunderstood phenomenon, and increased clarity is essential for the healing and justice victims deserve. Our review has identified key features of trauma bonds and four important aspects related to trauma bonding. We hope that these findings will contribute toward the development of interventions and policies that can continue to empower survivors of sex trafficking.

Implications for Future Research, Policy, and Practice

Future research.

- Development of instruments that are effective in identifying and measuring trauma bonding.
- Qualitative research on how survivors of sex trafficking define and experience trauma bonds.
  - How does trauma bonding interact with other concerns to influence survivors to refuse to prosecute their traffickers?
  - How do diverse demographic characteristics affect the manifestation of trauma bonding?
  - How does trauma bonding differ in incidents of familial trafficking?
- Intervention studies of effective practices for helping victims of sex trafficking break or sever their trauma bonds with traffickers
  - Studies should be conducted to gather comprehensive and contextualized accounts of sex trafficking survivors who have successfully severed trauma bonds.
  - Intervention studies based on these survivors’ strategies should be designed and tested.

Policy.

- Legislators who are drafting laws regarding the prosecution of traffickers or protection of victims must take into consideration the common presence of a trauma bond between a victim and her trafficker and the way that bond affects the behavior of the victim.
- A concise and agreed-upon definition of trauma bonding needs to be developed and disseminated, preferably with specific diagnostic criteria that could be included in an updated version of the DSM-5.

Practice.

- Law enforcement officials need to be educated on this concept and trained on how to effectively respond to these situations with sensitivity and awareness.
- Practitioners working with victims who have exited their trafficking situations need adequate training and resources on how to understand and help victims who are still attached to their traffickers.
- The fundamental need for social connection or attachment implies that strong social connections should be part of programming for survivors. More efforts should be made to fund and design mentoring programs that promote healing for survivors.

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