



## Trafficking in human beings:

# Psychological coercion and investigative interviewing

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**TRAFFICKERS OFTEN USE** manipulation to tie their victims with what is sometimes called “invisible chains”. These, often subtle and largely psychological means of controlling and manipulating victims are hard to detect and prove by the criminal justice system. The terms used for this phenomenon in the scientific literature are psychological coercion, psychological control and coercive control.

**IN THIS POLICY** brief, we use the term psychological coercion, as it is widely used in the human trafficking literature. This policy brief provides a brief insight into psychological coercion as a phenomenon, what is known about the use of such coercion in the context of trafficking in human beings and how investigators can strive to address the issue of psychological coercion within criminal investigations.

## Psychological coercion as a phenomenon

**PSYCHOLOGICAL COERCION CONSISTS** of controlling behaviour aimed to render a person dependent and/or subordinate through, for instance, functionally isolating them from supportive persons, depriving them from everyday needs and exerting psychological and sometimes other forms of violence. Psychological coercion should be perceived as a continuum, an ongoing process, rather than as separate individual events. Also, the effects of such coercion should be assessed as cumulative. This is challenging for the criminal justice system which by tradition focuses on identifying distinct, unique deeds and their consequences.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL COERCION MAY** include the use of violence to scare victims into obedience. However, violence is not necessarily needed to make the victim succumb to the will of the perpetrator. Different forms of psychological violence and abusive behaviours, including threats of violence (directed at the victim but also at persons important to them) are likely to lead to a constant state of fear in which the victim may become increasingly helpless and lose their agency.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL MAY** also include positive interactions. Altering between positive and negative behaviours may in fact be even more powerful than using purely negative strategies. Human beings are by nature social and seek social interaction. Where the only human contact is the perpetrator, the victim may look for any positive form of interaction and form a stronger bond than interaction purely based on fear would induce. The victim may start to sympathise or experience solidarity towards the perpetrator. This phenomenon is a remote relative to the phenomenon often referred to as the “Stockholm syndrome”, which typically means that a victim of abduction develops positive emotions towards perpetrators and indeed starts liaising with them. This behaviour on the part of the victim is not likely to reflect a genuinely positive and mutual relationship but may be a rational strategy for surviving in the situation.

# The use of psychological coercion in the context of trafficking in human beings

**THE PERPETRATOR MAY** form a relationship with a victim, pretending to be a friend, a partner, or a parental figure. Previous vulnerabilities and abusive experiences as well as the absence of positive and reliable relationships are risk factors for the victim, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as trauma bonding. The bond between victim and perpetrator can tie the victim to the perpetrator more efficiently than expressions of threat and violence. The "positive" bonding may initially be a survival instinct but may change over time toward a more complex interaction.

**RELATIONSHIPS RELYING ON** trauma bonding have been described as including an imbalance of power, the perpetrator alternating between positive and negative forms of interaction, a gratitude on the part of the victim for the positive interaction and self-blame for the negative, and the victims assuming the perspective of the perpetrator when looking upon themselves and their situation.

**ISOLATING THE VICTIMS** increases their vulnerability vis-à-vis the perpetrator. As their possibility to other daily human interaction is diminished, victims are restricted physically and socially, and become even more dependent on the perpetrator. Isolation may imply a total restriction from other contacts than the perpetrator(s) or abusers/exploiters (such as sex buyers or other clients) or being surrounded by peers who are allies to the perpetrator(s) or otherwise unreliable and thus not able to provide true support or more healthy social interactions. This may in practise reduce all the possibilities for the victim to socialise outside the exploitative context.

**PERPETRATORS MAY ENSURE** this restriction through transporting the victims wherever they need to go (such as for instance, educational facilities, social services and healthcare) so as to ensure they do not socialise freely, restricting their use of social media, phones, and other means of contacting, and making sure they do not have any economic means to independently engage in activities that cost.

**AS VICTIMS MAY** be reluctant to disclose and unresponsive to authorities due to their background, authorities on the other hand may struggle to understand the unresponsiveness of the victims and add pressure on them – which may further increase the lack of faith in and bad experiences of authorities on the part of the victims.

**IN ENCOUNTERS WITH** possible victims of trafficking, authorities thus need to understand the background factors influencing the victims. Another factor that the criminal justice system needs to take into consideration is the fact that victims may realise their own victimisation only at a later point in time, and not necessarily from the beginning of their victimisation.

## Psychological coercion can take the shape of:

- **DEPRIVING** the victim from their needs, making them dependent on the perpetrator(s)
- **ISOLATING** the victim and restraining healthy human contacts
- **USING** psychological violence such as humiliation and threats
- **USING** or threatening to use physical and/or sexual violence
- **ALTERNATING** between positive and negative behaviour



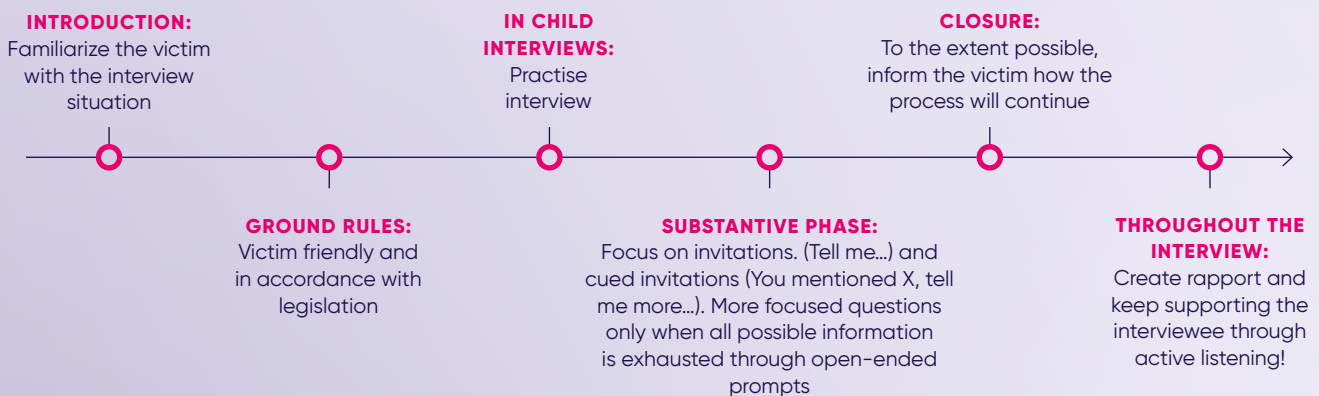
# Investigative interviews with trafficking victims

**VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING** may be reluctant to disclose, and they may also be treated harshly or met with disbelief by the investigative authorities, which is likely to be detrimental to the rapport necessary for a meaningful interview. There is scarce research on investigative interviews with trafficking victims. However, there is strong evidence for how to interview other vulnerable groups, and it is also well established that the quality of the information provided in investigative interviews is very much dependent on the quality of the investigator's interviewing practice. Before more research is accumulated, the advice for now is to rely on the general principles of evidence-based investigative interviewing, while future research hopefully will address to what extent these are adaptable to investigating cases of trafficking. While the basic principles of encountering all victims with respect, the need to establish good rapport, to rely on recall rather than recognition memory, and allowing victims to provide their accounts in free narratives are likely to hold true also in trafficking cases, some particularities are important to understand in this context.

**ONE OF THE** most important phases of the evidence-based investigative interview is the planning and preparation of the interview, in which the interviewers should inform themselves about the victim's background, the known details of the suspicion and, if possible, the victim's knowledge about the investigation. When preparing for the interview, possible interpretation needs should also be considered, as well as ensuring the dialect spoken by the victim is taken into account.

**A PROFESSIONAL INTERPRETER**, preferably a registered court/legal interpreter, should be contacted and the interview should be planned jointly. The joint planning can include going through the main topics that are likely to be discussed, possible pitfalls in the communication (for instance, the absence of certain terms in a given language) and how to address possible miscommunications.

## Phases of the investigative interview



**IN COMPARISON TO** many other criminal investigations, human trafficking is often taking place in a continuum of events or over a series of similar events. This has an impact on how the experiences are remembered: When victims experience something repeatedly, they may struggle to remember separate instances of the events but rather form a sort of script memory; a memory of what usually happens.

**THIS SHOULD BE** acknowledged in the investigative interview, where the judicial interest of obtaining as much information as possible of unique events must be weighed against the human memory's struggle to separate between different similar experiences.

### Recommendations for interviewing about repeated events:

1. **USE** generic "What usually happens when..." AND specific "What happened yesterday" as this allows for a recollection of memories of different types
2. **ASK** if something happened one time or more than one time
3. **LABEL** specific episodes e.g., "Tell me about when you visited person X..."
4. **ASK** about specific episodes – most recent, the first, the one the person remembers the best
5. **ASK** about repeated events already in the practise interview phase (episodic memory training) recommended particularly in interviews with children

# Themes to explore in an interview to address the topic of psychological coercion

**AS VICTIMS MAY** not perceive themselves as restrained, but perhaps even as relying willingly on their perpetrators, and as they may have been explicitly forbidden to speak in negative terms about their situation to authorities, it may not be advisable to directly ask if they were "forced" or "restricted".

**INSTEAD, INTERVIEWERS ARE** advised to also here interview in an open-ended way, maximising the amount of information provided by interviewees through asking them to describe their situation as fully as possible.

## Interviewing about psychological coercion – themes to cover:

### Control / freedom:

- **FRIENDS**, social life outside the home, means of contacting
- **USE** of phone, social media (access / other persons' access)
- **BANK** cards, money, salaries, payments
- **THINGS** you can do / cannot do? / What would have happened if...
- **WHAT** did you do if you needed something / needed to buy something

### As much information as possible about everyday life, typical days. Daily routines!

### Circumstances of living (room of one's own, sanitation, food)

### Relationships

- **TO** suspect / Friends / Family
- **ASKING** about persons: Tell me about... How did you meet, positive / negative things (what do you like / not like about him/her)?
- **IS** there someone you can trust / if there are problems, who do you tell?
- **DESCRIBE** what a good day was like / Good / bad situations / experiences



**#ELECT THB**

Enhanced Law Enforcement Cooperation and Training on Trafficking in Human Beings

**THE ELECT THB-PROJECT** (Enhanced Law Enforcement Cooperation and Training on Trafficking in Human Beings) is designed to improve the identification and investigation of trafficking in human beings (THB) for sexual and labour exploitation and increase collaboration among law enforcement authorities and other key actors in order to combat such exploitation in Estonia, Latvia and Finland.



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