



“What is freedom?” Research Briefing 1 of 6 • August 2020

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What is freedom?

Central Florida research briefing on a study defining “freedom from modern slavery”¹

by Juliana Semione

This study engaged UK and US participants from six locations over the question, “What is freedom from slavery?” One of these locations was Central Florida, researched in Fall 2018. Participants were survivors of human trafficking and individuals who engage professionally in anti-trafficking efforts. This briefing is a summary of the Central Florida findings.

Key research findings

Participants in Central Florida primarily define freedom as **psychological recovery from trauma**. This understanding of freedom emphasizes an individual’s mental and emotional recovery from the trauma of human trafficking. The ability to make choices and to have positive relationships with others are acknowledged as elements of freedom but are definitively secondary to psychological recovery.

For many participants in Central Florida, freedom from human trafficking is understood as an internal experience. Their individual conceptions of freedom were heavily informed by a psychological perspective—sometimes an explicitly clinical perspective. This conception of freedom from slavery as **psychological recovery from trauma** is shared by over 69% of Central Florida participants.

Among those participants, two (≈15%) emphasized “healing” as a broader concept that requires wraparound support. For them, wraparound support includes, but is not limited to, support for psychological recovery. They also consider the role of wider political and economic systems as integral to freedom.

The remaining ≈31% of local participants conceived of freedom in ways that were unique; their perspectives had very little in common with the above and very little in common with one another.

Why is this important?

Anti-slavery researchers and practitioners have long focused on defining and measuring modern slavery. However, little attention has been paid to how we define or measure freedom. Anti-slavery efforts around

the world work to identify victims and support them toward “freedom.” Many anti-slavery professionals and organizations say they do their daily work in the name of “freedom.” But what does this mean? What is freedom?

This study allows UK and US anti-slavery stakeholders to better understand one another; to initiate meaningful conversations around freedom; to better understand the substance of freedom; and to consider how we might begin to measure freedom in the future. This series of six research briefings is one output of the “What is freedom?” study. The briefings are designed to provide each research site with localized findings so that individuals and anti-slavery organizations can share in those same benefits at the community level.

Local Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1: Discuss these findings with your clients, your peers, or other participants.** Defining freedom is only a fruitful exercise if we engage with one another over the topic. Discuss freedom with others and do so often. Does your definition of freedom differ from those of your peers and colleagues? How so, and why might that be?
- **Recommendation 2: Share your thoughts on these findings.** Do you see your own perspective reflected in these definitions? What do the findings mean to you? Do you have insights from your local work or experience that could provide further context for these findings? *Your reflections are very welcome. Contact information is above.*
- **Recommendation 3: Consider what these findings mean for you.** Do you think of your work primarily in terms being *against* trafficking, or *for* freedom? Do you see new connections between freedom and the work of others? How might these findings help Central Florida professionals and survivors measure freedom or gauge the success of programs? If you work with survivors, ask how these findings resonate with their ideas about freedom. If you are a survivor, consider sharing your perspective on freedom with local service providers.
- **Recommendation 4: Imagine how you would measure freedom.** Is there value in measuring freedom for the local anti-trafficking community? If so, how might these findings help Central Florida anti-trafficking professionals and survivors measure freedom or gauge the success of programs?

Research overview

This study took place at six sites—three in the US and three in the UK. There were a total of 73 participants. Of these, 43 were from US sites and 30 were from UK sites. At least 26 individuals from Central Florida were invited to participate in the study. Thirteen individuals agreed to do so. Of these 13, nine were direct victim service providers, three were law enforcement professionals, and one was a survivor.

This study used Q methodology to understand how individual participants define freedom and how their definitions compare or contrast to one another across sites and between countries. The aim of the study is to learn what definitions of “freedom” exist among individuals in the anti-trafficking field—not to define freedom legally or philosophically.

Participants were given a deck of 49 cards, each displaying a different possible answer to the question, “What is freedom from slavery?”² They sorted these into three piles according to their level of agreement with the cards: Agree, Neutral, and Disagree. Participants then sorted the cards onto a grid, which required them to rank them in relationship to the other cards in the deck. This process is called “Q sorting.” Each participant was also interviewed.

The results were analyzed using KADE, software designed to show patterns and differences among Q sorts. Key elements of the Central Florida research findings are described below. They are based on KADE results and on interviews with participants.

Freedom is psychological recovery from trauma

The majority of participants from Central Florida define freedom as **psychological recovery from trauma**. Freedom from is understood as an internal experience that survivors may someday attain when they are emotionally and mentally healed from the trauma they experienced when they were trafficked.

The views of over 69% of Central Florida participants are represented in this definition. The aspects of freedom that these participants value the most are listed below.

- Being healed from the damaging effects trafficking had on you and healed from the physical harm that trafficking did to you

- Having free will, or the ability to do things without feeling controlled, coerced, pressured, or forced to do so
- Refusing to let a trafficking experience in your past devastate you or cripple your life
- To live without fear
- To be able to defend yourself against people who try to limit your well-being, dominate you, or traffic you
- To stop believing the lies others have told you about yourself and about the world, so that those lies no longer have power over you
- Knowing your own worth and knowing that it does not depend on other people

Participants whose Q sorts correlate strongly to this definition made comments during their interviews that help to further explain this definition. One participant explained that she sorted the Q sample onto the grid according to how important the statements were for psychological healing. Another participant said that “being healed” is related to being “able to defend yourself” because, without being emotionally healed it is easy for a survivor to return to their trafficker or to another exploitative situation. Several participants emphasized the psychological bondage involved in trafficking, with one saying it is worse than any physical aspect of modern slavery.

A subset of participants emphasizing wraparound care and structural systems

Whereas the majority of participants considered psychological recovery definitive of freedom, two participants felt that this was an incomplete definition of freedom. They emphasized “wraparound care” and valued “having political and economic systems that do not dominate you or limit your options to the point where your decisions are not really your own” in their conception of freedom.

Four individuals had standalone definitions of freedom

Four individuals (about ≈31% of Florida participants) held definitions of freedom that had little in common with one another or with the definition described above. These participants include two direct victim service providers and two law enforcement professionals. As Q methodology looks for patterns, these definitions have been recorded but are not included in this briefing.

¹ The term used to describe human trafficking in this study is “modern slavery.” This is because the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham is located in England. “Modern slavery” in England is synonymous with what is meant by “human trafficking” throughout the United States.

² A PDF file containing this deck of cards (the “Q sample”) can be found at https://uniofnottm-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/juliana_semione_nottingham_ac_uk/EZh9iPVxh69JtnnGtJk1n18B4BYs3JqrWllvOYVXfUexgA?e=2ipms0