



What is freedom?

Southern California 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 Southern California, researched in Winter 2018-2019.

Participants were survivors of human trafficking and individuals who engage professionally in anti-trafficking efforts. This briefing is a summary of the California findings.

Key research findings

Among participants in Southern California, there are three predominant definitions of freedom. These are listed below.

- Freedom is being psychologically removed from your trafficker and having the opportunity to thrive
- Freedom is reclaiming your life
- Freedom is being wholly removed from your trafficker and having choices

Taken together, these conceptions represent how over 78% of California participants define freedom. There are three additional participants (≈21%) whose conceptions of freedom do not correlate to any of the definitions above. The views of these three participants also have little in common with one another.

Why is this important?

Anti-slavery researchers 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 identifies patterns—definitions of freedom that are shared across groups of participants. The resulting definitions are grounded in the realities and perspectives of survivors and anti-slavery professionals.

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 the findings.** Do you see your own perspective reflected in any of 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? 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 Southern California anti-trafficking professionals and survivors measure freedom or gauge the success of programs?

Research overview

This study took place in six communities—three in the UK and three in the US. There were a total of 73 participants. Of these, 30 were from UK locations and 43 were from US locations. At least 15 individuals from Southern California were invited to participate in the study. Fifteen agreed to do so, though one research session was canceled due to extenuating circumstances. Of the 14 active participants, seven were direct victim service providers, three were law enforcement professionals, and four were survivors.

This study used Q methodology to understand how individual participants define freedom and how their definitions compare or contrast to one another across

communities 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.

To accomplish this, 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 cards into three piles according to their level of agreement with the statements: Agree, Neutral, and Disagree. Participants then sorted these cards onto a grid, which required them to rank the statements into smaller sets, further specifying their personal level of agreement with each statement in relationship to the other statements. This process is called “Q sorting.” Each participant was then interviewed. The manner in which every participant sorted the cards onto the grid was analyzed using software called KADE.

Key elements of the Southern California research findings are described below. They are based on KADE results and on interviews with participants.

Freedom is being psychologically removed from your trafficker and having the opportunity to thrive

This definition of freedom is shared by two victim service providers and two law enforcement professionals (28.6% of California participants). For these participants, freedom has two defining qualities.

The first is that a survivor is emotionally and mentally removed from the influence of their trafficker. This involves the ability to act “without feeling controlled, coerced, pressured, or forced to do so,” “knowing your own worth,” and “never seeing yourself as a slave and never accepting slavery, even if others once treated you like a slave.”

The second is that a survivor “be given an equal opportunity with everybody else to thrive.” These participants believe that thriving, or “doing well in life,” is important because survivors who are not presented with sufficient opportunity to thrive after trafficking may be at greater risk of re-victimization. Having an equal opportunity to thrive includes

- Having “your humanity recognized by others”
- Being “able to defend yourself against people who try to limit your well-being, dominate you, or traffic you” (including a previous trafficker)
- Being “protected in the areas of life where you are vulnerable” and
- Finding the internal “motivation” to take advantage of opportunities to thrive.

These participants believe that freedom is an ideal; not

everyone will be given an equal opportunity to thrive in the world. However, the ideal is something we should all strive for.

Freedom is reclaiming your life

This definition of freedom is shared by three survivors and two victim service providers (35.7% of California participants). These participants believe that “the ability to achieve goals that matter to you” is the most important aspect of freedom. This ability must be in the context of “No longer having to make choices you don’t like just so that you can survive”—a survivor is not yet truly free if their choices and goals are driven by a need to survive. According to one participant, one of the first steps toward freedom may be a survivor coming to understand that they are still able to make choices despite their trafficking experience.

For these participants, freedom is as much about achieving “dreams” for one’s life as it is about “feeling no shame” or “choosing your own lifestyle and shaping your own character.” Although these goals might be realized through a series of choices, choice itself is not the defining quality of freedom. Rather, freedom is a survivor’s ability to reclaim what their goals are and who they are. Reclaiming one’s life comes about over time through a personal process.

Freedom is being wholly removed from your trafficker and having choices

This definition of freedom is shared by one law enforcement professional and one survivor (14.3% of California participants). These participants believe that “Freedom is something you always possess in reality, even if someone else says you are a slave.” By this they mean that a person can mentally conceive of themselves as free even while in a trafficking situation. However, they cannot fully experience freedom as a reality until they are both physically and psychologically removed from their trafficker; the “whole person ... has to experience freedom.” While physical separation from a trafficker may be a one-time event (for example, during a police operation), becoming psychologically removed from a trafficker may be a long “process of adjusting.” A person is not fully free until they cease to experience the effects of their trafficker’s influence over them and are “healed from the damaging effects ... and healed from the physical harm” of trafficking.

When a survivor comes into this experience of freedom, they will have “free will, or the ability to do things without feeling controlled, coerced, pressured, or forced to do so.” They will be “able to make decisions in their own right and on their own terms.”

¹ The term used to describe human trafficking in this study is “modern slavery.” 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” in the US.

² A PDF file containing these cards (the “Q sample”) can be found at https://uniofnottm-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/juliana_semione_nottingham_ac_uk/EZh9iPVxh69JtnnGtJk1nI8B4BYs3JqrWllvOYVXfUexgA?e=2ipms0