



# What is freedom?

## Humberside research briefing on a study defining ‘freedom from modern slavery’

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 Humberside, where research took place during Summer 2019. Participants were survivors of modern slavery and individuals who engage professionally in anti-slavery efforts.*

*This briefing is a summary of the Humberside findings.*

### Key research findings

Among participants from Humberside, there was one predominant definition of freedom: **freedom is having your basic needs met so that you can exercise free will**. Humberside is the only research location where there is strong consensus that ‘having your basic needs met’ is definitive of freedom.

Additionally, there were three participants whose definitions of freedom were almost entirely unique. Two of these three participants prioritised free will in their definitions of freedom.

### 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 organisations 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 localised findings so that

individuals and anti-slavery organisations 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.** Compared to other locations, Humberside has a low level of consensus around a definition of freedom. (This will be discussed overleaf.) Are there strengths and/or challenges to having a low level of consensus around freedom among the local anti-slavery community? 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? Is it important to have a shared definition or definitions of freedom?
- **Recommendation 2: Share your thoughts on these findings.** Do you see your own perspective reflected in this definition of freedom? 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 modern slavery*, 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-slavery community? If so, how might these findings help anti-slavery professionals and survivors in Humberside and throughout England measure freedom or gauge the success of survivor support programmes?

## Research overview

This study took place at six sites—three in the UK and three in the US. There were a total of 73 participants. Of these, 30 were from UK sites and 43 were from US sites. At least 17 individuals from Humberside were invited to participate; seven agreed to do so. Of these seven, four were direct victim service providers, two

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 locations and between countries. The aim of the study is to learn what definitions of 'freedom' exist among individuals in the anti-slavery 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?'<sup>1</sup> 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 analysed using KADE, software designed to show patterns and differences among Q sorts. Key findings from the Humberside research are described below. They are based on KADE results and on interviews with participants.

### **Freedom is having your basic needs met so that you can exercise free will**

This definition of freedom represents the viewpoints of one law enforcement professional and three victim service providers (57.1% of Humberside participants).

For these individuals, the most important quality of freedom is 'having free will, or the ability to do things without feeling controlled, coerced, pressured, or forced to do so'. Almost as important is being able 'to live without fear'.

One reason that it is so important to be able to 'live without fear' is that fear is 'crippling'. It can affect a person's mental health and can even inhibit their ability to exercise free will. For these participants, fear is directly relevant to having 'the basic things you need to live a healthy and normal life'. When a person does not have the 'basic things' they need, they are 'in crisis' or 'desperate'; they 'don't feel like [they] have any choices.'

The 'basic things you need to live a healthy and normal life' include, among other things, 'having a place to call home'. To the extent that the absence of

these causes people to live in fear and inhibits their ability to exercise free will, these 'basic things' are a requisite for freedom.

Once a person is able to exercise free will, the most important choice for them to have is where to live and work.

### **Three individuals had standalone definitions of freedom**

Three individuals held definitions of freedom that had little in common with one another or with the definition described above. These participants include one direct victim service provider, one law enforcement professional and one survivor (42.9% of Humberside participants). As Q methodology looks for patterns, these definitions have been recorded but are not included in this briefing.

Of these three individuals, two of them (the service provider and law enforcement professional) share one thing in common with the consensus definition described above: they believe 'Having free will, or the ability to do things without feeling controlled, coerced, pressured, or forced to do so' is the most important aspect of freedom.

The survivor participant agreed that free will is a part of freedom, but ranked it as significantly less important than fourteen other specific aspects of freedom. This participant's top priorities—each given equal importance—were 'having a place to call home' and 'to be able to get the basic things you need to live a healthy and normal life'. This is of great importance to the definition described under the previous heading, but that definition does not otherwise encapsulate this participant's perspective.

It is not uncommon in Q methodology for some study participants to fall outside of the patterns that emerge. However, 42.9% represents an unusually high number of participants. Only one other research site had a similar number of standalone definitions. At that location, it was clear from interviews that anti-slavery professionals do not regularly discuss freedom. This may have contributed to that site's low level of consensus around definitions of freedom. It is not clear from interviews whether this is also the case in Humberside, but it is recommended that Humberside professionals discuss freedom regularly with one another and with survivors.

---

<sup>1</sup> A PDF file containing this deck of cards (the 'Q sample') can be found at [https://uniofnottmy.sharepoint.com/:b/g/personal/juliana\\_semione\\_nottingham\\_ac\\_uk/EZrh9iPVxh69JtnnGtJk1nI8B4BYs3JqrWllvOYVXfUexgA?e=2ipms0](https://uniofnottmy.sharepoint.com/:b/g/personal/juliana_semione_nottingham_ac_uk/EZrh9iPVxh69JtnnGtJk1nI8B4BYs3JqrWllvOYVXfUexgA?e=2ipms0)