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The Relationship Between Human Trafficking and an Occupational Therapy Career

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A thesis submitted to the Honors College at the University of Arkansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology with Honors.

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## **Introduction**

Human trafficking can be defined as the recruitment, transportation, harboring, or receipt of persons by improper means (such as force, abduction, fraud, or coercion) for an improper purpose including forced labor or sexual exploitation (National Institute of Justice, 2018).

Human trafficking can occur in a multitude of ways, but the two most prominent areas are sex trafficking and labor trafficking. Sex trafficking is the crime of using force, fraud, or coercion to induce another individual to perform commercial sex acts. Common types include escort services, pornography, illicit massage businesses, brothels, and outdoor solicitation (Polaris, 2018). Labor trafficking is the crime of using force, fraud, or coercion to induce another individual to work or provide services. Common types include agriculture, domestic work, restaurants, cleaning services, and carnivals (Polaris, 2018).

Human trafficking is a global issue, and at least 167 countries have enslaved people in their population (Global Slavery Index, 2018). Currently, it is the fastest growing crime in the world (Department of Defense, 2017). Worldwide, it is a multi-billion-dollar criminal industry that has entrapped an estimated 40.3 million people. Women are estimated to compose 79% of people who are trafficked internationally, men composing the other 29% (Global Slavery Index, 2016). It is estimated that 50% of all trafficking victims are under 18 years old (Ark of Hope for Children, 2017), and reports have shown that globally, more than 1.2 million juveniles are at risk of being trafficked every year (Crisis Aid International, 2012, Gorman, 2016).

While human trafficking is a global problem, it is a local one too. Most literature focuses on foreign trafficking victims, making research on the number of victims of human trafficking in the United States limited. The estimated number of people living in modern-day slavery in the United States in 2018 is 403,000 (Global Slavery Index, 2018). While the United States has a

lower prevalence of human trafficking in comparison to other countries, that is still nearly half a million people living in modern-day slavery right here at home.

Who is being trafficked? While human trafficking spans across all demographics, there are some circumstances or vulnerabilities that lead to higher susceptibility to victimization and human trafficking (Human Trafficking Hotline, 2018). Several studies found that survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation are likely to have experienced conditions that may have made them more vulnerable to being trafficked, including (but not limited to): history of childhood abuse and neglect, history of sexual abuse or domestic violence, social discrimination, history of substance abuse, history of mental illness, placement in foster care, homelessness, and/or having run away from home or foster care at least once (Williamson, Perdue, Belton, & Burns, 2012, Human Trafficking Hotline, 2018). People targeted for international labor trafficking recruitment include those with lower literacy and education levels and those more likely to be living at or below the poverty line (Gorman, 2016). Those with disabilities (developmental, physical, or both) are also at an increased risk for recruitment for human trafficking, due to their increased risk for social powerlessness, communication deficits, decreased ability to protect oneself, and exploitation from family (Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, 2014). Furthermore, people with certain social and emotional traits are targeted for recruitment for domestic sex trafficking. People with low self-esteem and who lack self-direction are targeted for recruitment as well (Gorman, 2016).

After being recruited, people continue to undergo horrific experiences while in their trafficking situations. Victims often experience high levels of violence from their traffickers. Many are abused physically by their traffickers. This abuse can come in many forms, either without weapons (punching, kicking, raping) or with weapons (knives, guns, matches, cigarettes)

(Raphael & Feifer, 2017). Many traffickers also mentally abuse their victims, through things such as verbal threats, mind games, or forcing their victims to abuse substances (Raphael & Feifer, 2017). Victims' daily habits and routines are disrupted by trafficking. Victims often do not get sufficient nutrition and sleep. They are socially isolated which impacts their engagement in meaningful relationships with family/friends/other supports. The work victims are forced to do is degrading, unjust, and unsafe. It compromises their bodily integrity and security which keeps them from doing the everyday things they want, have, and need to do to maintain their physical and mental health.

These experiences can leave victims with a variety of physical and mental trauma issues once they get out of these situations. Survivors of trafficking sexual exploitation ages 14-60, interviewed for a 2012 study reported experiencing numerous mental and psychological conditions. These included: depression (89%), anxiety (76%), nightmares (74%), flashbacks (68%), feelings of shame or guilt (82%), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (55%), suicide attempts (42%) (Raphael & Feifer, 2017).

Human trafficking not only affects the individual physically and emotionally, but it also has a pervasive impact on the individual's ability to function as an occupational being (Cerny, 2016). In lay language, "occupation" is understood as an individual's job or paid work. Occupational therapists recognize occupation in a broader sense. Brown and Hollis stated that occupations "include the day-to-day activities that enable people to sustain themselves, to contribute to the life of their family, and to participate in the broader society." (Brown & Hollis, 2013). Occupations can be defined as any activity that takes up an individual's time, whether that be for productivity, self-care, or leisure. Occupations are fundamental to human health and well-

being because they provide meaning, identity, and structure to people's lives and reflect society's values and culture (Brown & Hollis, 2013).

Individuals who are trafficked are likely to experience a loss of the roles and occupations associated with their ages and typical developmental stages. Occupational deprivation occurs when individuals are subjected to conditions "in which people's needs for meaningful and health-promoting occupations go unmet or are systematically denied" (Bryant, Freeman, Granta, He, and Hough, 2015). Social injustices, such as trafficking, could alter a person's occupational identity, disrupt or alter their performance patterns (roles, habits, rituals, and routine) and reduce performance capacity. These disruptions have the potential to affect the individual in varied contexts and environments, and over the lifespan (Bryant, Freeman, Granta, He, and Hough, 2015).

Studies have found that 98% of sex trafficking victims and 81% of labor trafficking victims will require medical services as a result of the physical and sexual trauma experienced (Clawson, Small, Go, Myles, 2003). After victims of domestic human trafficking are rescued and put into contact with law enforcement, they are connected with a variety of service providers to address immediate needs, including medical care providers, social workers, and managerial and legal services (U.S. Department of State, TIP Office, 2014). It is at this point where an occupational therapist may join the rehabilitation team.

Occupational therapy is often thought of as a "clinical" profession, which isn't necessarily wrong given that most occupational therapists work in hospitals or occupational therapy practices (Liaison International, 2018). However, there are many uses for occupational therapists outside of your typical clinical setting.

Occupational therapy crosses physical-mental health boundaries. Occupational therapists work to a biopsychosocial model providing holistic care management and interventions for physical, psychological, emotional, and social issues associated with disability and functioning (Brown & Hollis, 2013). It has been stated that occupational therapists have an innate duty to work with not only individuals, but society as a whole when individuals experience social and occupational injustices (Bryant, Freeman, Granta, He, and Hough, 2015).

In the past, occupational therapy has been a component-driven practice that focuses mainly on the self-care aspects of occupations. This narrowing of the occupation to basic activities of daily living has limited occupational therapists (Gray, 1998). A component-driven practice is one that reduces an individual's treatment from goals to components. What this means is that the occupational therapist identifies a patient's underlying problems and then selects exercises or activities (depending on what is available at the clinic or facility) that are specifically geared toward improving strength, ROM, coordination, visual perception, problem solving, balance, attention, and so on and so forth. One problem with this is that component-driven approaches bear the assumption that changing underlying components will automatically create changes in occupational performance (Gray, 1998). This does not take into account the client's occupational health or recovery, and the client may leave the session with unaddressed occupational problems.

Occupational therapy practitioners today offer more client-centered intervention that emphasizes that value of active engagement in healthy occupations that lead to positive change in occupational performance skills and patterns to promote wellness, role competence, satisfaction, and improved quality of life (Cara, 2005). When human trafficking victims come to occupational therapists, they have a variety of many needs. In addition to the need for medical

and psychological services, studies have shown that victims have reported additional needs, including housing, family counseling, legal assistance, and life and job skills training (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). Because of occupational therapy practitioners' education and training, occupational therapy has the potential to have a profound effect in addressing these needs. The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education's (2011) standard for educational programs requires foundational content related to body functions and structures, human development, human behavior, sociocultural and diversity factors, performance of daily life activities, evaluation, and intervention planning (AOTA, 2011a). Therefore, occupational therapy practitioners are proficient in providing trauma-informed care to address physiological, cognitive, and psychosocial rehabilitation (AOTA, 2014).

Currently, the literature supporting the role of occupational therapy in addressing the problems of victims of human trafficking is minimal. However, evidence supports occupational therapy's efficacy with similar trauma populations, such as military personnel who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bulk, 2015). Canada's Department of Defense states that the role of occupational therapists, as it pertains to military personnel, is to assess an individual's functional abilities, assist the individual in recovering from impaired functions and strengthening those that are still intact, while teaching the patient how to deal with the disability and do things differently. This can be done by introducing technical aids such as wheelchairs, create and fit orthotic devices, and adapt ill and injured [Canadian Force] personnel's environment, including their home, vehicle, and workstation (Brown & Hollis, 2013). Occupational therapists can work across physical injury into emotional and psychological health for maximum rehabilitation (Brown & Hollis, 2013). Another trauma population that seems to benefit from the intervention of occupational therapists is service members with mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI).

Radomski et al suggest that by using evidence-informed and holistic services, occupational therapists have the potential to lead rehabilitation and reintegration efforts for service members with mTBI and advance changes in the profession itself (Radomski, Davidson, Voydetich, & Erickson, 2009). For those with mTBI, occupational therapy intervention may include teaching self-management strategies to minimize functional disability and pain-related distress and encouraging people with TBI and pain to participate in preferred family, vocational, and recreational activities as a means to avoid developing maladaptive avoidance and illness behavior (Radomski, Davidson, Voydetich, & Erickson, 2009). Participation in occupations can help individuals cope with traumatic stress, meet survival needs, find a diversion from stressful events, reinstate adaptive habits, rediscover a sense of identity, restore confidence in sense of identity, and “re-establish a sense of mastery in a situation in which a person feels a loss of control” (Scaffa, 2006).

### **Presentation Description**

For my honors thesis defense, I presented a PowerPoint presentation to the Introduction to Exercise Science class at the University of Arkansas. This presentation took place April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019 at 4:35 p.m. in the Science and Engineering building on the University of Arkansas campus. My presentation included information on the issue of human trafficking in the United States, the everyday role of occupational therapists, and how there is a beneficial relationship between occupational therapists and the rehabilitation and restoration of human trafficking victims. I showed how occupational therapy can play a role in combating human trafficking and in the restoration of its victims. Additional research is necessary on this subject.

### **Advice to Students**

After my presentation, the class asked me several questions. In this section, I will address those questions.

1.) How should one go about finding internships and shadowing opportunities in Northwest Arkansas?

- a. This biggest thing I learned when searching for internships or shadowing opportunities is that it is best to ask for these opportunities in person, rather than over the phone. This will increase your likelihood of getting the internship/shadowing opportunities. Facilities or private practices are very busy, and they can get multiple calls daily about topics like these – especially being in a college town. Your best chance to make an impression is asking in person, and then following up within 7 days.

2.) What are the first steps a student should take when trying to find a different job setting than what is typically found in a health care profession?

- a. When students are exploring how they can pursue their career in an unconventional way, the first step is to research. Research online and/or go find the right person to talk to. Often times, there is someone who has gone before us who can help guide us on the right path. Talk to professors, mentors, parents, peers, professionals in the field of study you are interested in or anyone who shares your passion or direction in life and see what advice they have to offer.

3.) How could a person potentially create new opportunities?

- a. If the exact field of study you are interested has not been explored yet at all, you can still pursue it! The best advice I have would be to talk to both sides to fully understand how the two could connect. For example – with my topic of

occupational therapy and human trafficking, I would speak to an occupational therapist and someone who is involved in the rehabilitation of human trafficking survivors, possibly a therapist or psychiatrist. Talking to both would give an insight to the main aspects of each side. You then would be able to make connections between the two and see how they could work together for maximal efficiency.

4.) What is your advice for how people can get involved in similar awareness campaigns, like Pedal the Pacific?

- a. I heard of Pedal the Pacific through Instagram, simply by knowing a friend of a friend. (Pedal the Pacific is an annual charity bike ride from Seattle to San Diego that raises awareness of sex trafficking and raises money for The Refuge for DMST – a safehouse for minors who have been exploited through sex trafficking.) If you see an awareness campaign for a cause you are passionate about, reach out to them! Ask how you can get involved with that campaign specifically, or how you can get involved in a more general campaign.

5.) How do you see occupational therapy changing/evolving in the future?

- a. In the future, I hope that occupational therapists, as well as other medical professionals, continue to explore their potential within this spectrum of physical and mental health. An important thing to recognize in rehabilitation or therapy of any kind is the mental barriers that come along with the physical barriers. There is no doubt that the mind is a very powerful thing. Every day we hear stories about people who defy science with their recovery. I believe that if we can better

understand how to tap into and fix the things we cannot see, it will help us better understand how to fix the conditions we can see.

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