

COMMENTARY

## Moving beyond employees: Antitrafficking training as facilitating social change

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Medeiros and Griffith (2019) bring to the forefront the important role that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists have on the front lines of preventing sexual offenses by empowering and equipping employees via workplace trainings. This role cannot be denied, nor can it be over-emphasized. However, it is also arguably shortsighted when viewed only within the bounds of employee-on-employee (or employee-on-client, etc.) sexual harassment/assault. That is, such a limited scope necessarily overlooks the notable potential that some workplaces have for reaching beyond their own walls to curb sexual offenses in the broader domain. To that end, we suggest that the insights of I-O psychologists in this area are applicable in responding to the humanitarian crisis of sex trafficking, one of the most visible facets of the broader problem of human trafficking.

Sex trafficking—human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation—is one of the most pervasive and devastating sexually based crimes of our time (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). Although sex trafficking does not operate within a particular company or corporation, it does operate *through* various businesses across a variety of sectors. Thus, there are a wide range of industries wherein employees are more likely to encounter trafficking victims, including the hospitality, transportation, and healthcare industries.

Perhaps most notably, the *hospitality* industry plays a key role in sex trafficking, as hotel rooms are a common location for commercial sex. Indeed, the National Human Trafficking Hotline identifies hotels and motels as the location of approximately 70% of cases of reported sex trafficking, with traffickers commonly renting rooms out of which to run their operations. Although recent years have yielded advice to hotel guests to photograph their hotel rooms to aid in the investigation of sex trafficking (e.g., *traffickcam.com* by The Exchange Initiative), the power also lies more broadly with hotel chains and their employees, who are especially likely to encounter trafficking situations. In particular, these employees are in a unique position to recognize key industry-specific trafficking indicators, such as hotel guests paying in cash, travelers with little or no luggage, or a steady flow of different men visiting the same room (ECPAT-USA, 2017). As such, when hotel employees are trained to attune to these indicators, they are empowered to take action by reporting the suspected trafficking to authorities. Indeed, between 2008 and 2015, over 1,400 calls and texts to trafficking assistance hotlines originated from hotels (Polaris Project, 2015), indicating the important role that employees in this industry can play in curbing sex trafficking.

A related industry similarly likely to encounter trafficking victims is the *transportation* industry. Indeed, transportation modalities, such as taxis, ride-sharing programs, buses, and commercial trucks, are common means via which to transport victims, as well as means used by victims themselves in attempts to escape the trafficking trade. Moreover, transportation hubs—for example, truck stops, bus and train stations, and airports—are common locales used by traffickers to target potential new victims. Convenience stores likewise occupy a key place in the trafficking process due to their access to transportation modalities. These businesses—particularly those

along highways and interstates—are frequented by drivers travelling long distances and may serve as a neutral meeting point for traffickers. As noted by In Our Backyard, an antitrafficking non-profit, traffickers may also send their victims into convenience stores to purchase food, cigarettes, or condoms, or to use the (usually single-stall) restroom while the trafficker pumps fuel. As such, employees in this industry—from taxi and bus drivers to flight attendants to truckers to convenience store clerks—are well-situated to recognize and report signs of sex trafficking (e.g., loitering individuals who periodically enter and exit vehicles or who lack awareness of their locale or intended destination). Moreover, as victims may be traveling alone, transportation workers are in a unique position to encounter victims away from the eye of the trafficker and may therefore be better able to verbally assess the situation, offer help, or even safely physically intervene as compared to workers in other industries.

Finally, *healthcare* professionals also have an increased likelihood of encountering trafficking victims. Indeed, up to 87% of sex trafficking victims seek medical care while in captivity (Egyud, Stephens, Swanson-Bierman, DiCuccio, & Whitman, 2017), and over one-quarter of victims obtain dental care (Syme, Camardese, & Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). Due in part to the health risks inherent in sex trafficking, victims often need healthcare-related services on an episodic or emergency basis. As such, a wide range of medical personnel, including paramedics and emergency room workers (doctors, nurses, social workers), are particularly likely to encounter victims seeking medical services as a result of injuries sustained or health complications arising from being trafficked. In some cases, patients are in the process of escaping captivity, though in other circumstances they are still being actively victimized, and as such medical professionals must be able to recognize relevant signs and behaviors (e.g., likely clinical presentations of trafficking victims, lack of identification, not allowed to speak for themselves, not knowing what city they are in), refer the victim appropriately (e.g., to a case worker), and report the trafficking to authorities. Healthcare workers are also in a unique position of responsibility to do so, considering their roles as mandatory reporters combined with the consideration that many victims of sex trafficking are minors. In this vein, the American College of Emergency Physicians explicitly outlines in its policy statement a number of recommendations for emergency room personnel regarding identification and reporting of trafficking victims (Annals of Emergency Medicine, 2016).

Although the aforementioned signs and suspicious behaviors may not seem surprising, they are easily ignored by employees lacking the requisite training to be attuned to them and recognize them as indications of trafficking. As such, training employees to recognize the signs of trafficking among their customer or clientele base—whether hotel guests, passengers, patients, or customers—is, we argue, a useful and necessary point of inclusion when considering “how I-O psychologists can extend the conversation on sexual [offenses] through workplace training” (Medeiros & Griffith, 2019). Although outside the bounds of traditional trainings aimed at improving job knowledge and skills, training in sex trafficking recognition results from organizations successfully capitalizing on their unique positions in this space to help stamp out this wide-reaching problem. Such trainings are an important start in thinking outside of the box and recognizing and embracing our ability as I-O psychologists to facilitate positive social change. However, they are still in their infancy, and therefore rigorous evaluations of the impact of such trainings are scarce (Powell, Dickins, & Stoklosa, 2017). As such, they would certainly benefit from our evidence-based training design and evaluation efforts, such as those heralded by Medeiros and Griffith.

Of particular relevance are the considerations of self-efficacy, perceived utility, and pre-training motivation emphasized by Medeiros and Griffith (2019). A common misconception that many individuals and employees—like society as a whole—have about trafficking is that it does not occur within one’s community or place of work. To that end, the issue is rarely on one’s radar, and though a grave reality of our modern world, is often treated as a step removed from our immediate environment, especially in the workplace. As a result, even blatant instances of trafficking, such as the 2006 auction of Eastern European women that took place in plain sight in front of a diner at a London airport (Shelley, 2010), can take place unimpeded. However, it is for

precisely this reason that there is both a critical need and ample opportunity to educate employees in relevant sectors on the prevalence and signs of sex trafficking, thus contributing to the perceived relevance and utility of the training. Likewise, specific training approaches that illustrate the impactful role that employees can play in curbing trafficking can instill a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment, and tangibly connect employees to the current larger societal movements surrounding sexual exploitation and offenses (e.g., #metoo). In this way, such trainings can rely in part on individuals' intrinsic motivation for serving the greater good and the inherent human desire to contribute toward something bigger than oneself (e.g., Ryff, 2018). In particular, in light of the current societal zeitgeist, created in part by the widespread recognition of the #MeToo movement, employees may be especially motivated to participate in trainings aimed at preventing sexual offenses such as trafficking.

That said, we must also be cognizant of the fact that whenever we are dealing with broader societal or humanitarian issues, the context shifts, as does the extent to which strict adherence to best practices is practicable or even possible. This challenge is further exacerbated when considering issues that are largely underground, such as trafficking. To that end, we must be willing to sacrifice some of our marriage to strict formulaic design and evaluation in recognition of realistic conditions and constraints. For example, for complex and largely covert societal problems such as trafficking, issues such as measurement considerations and outcome indices will rarely be as clear cut as we, as scientists, would like them to be. The challenges inherent in designing successful sexual harassment/assault trainings compared to traditional employee knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) trainings are exacerbated with trainings focused on sex trafficking (e.g., lack of publicly accessible data, measurement difficulties). This is a result of obstacles such as limited availability of data, often anonymous data sources (or organizations weary of being associated with trafficking), and the clandestine nature of those populations involved or at risk (though, as the trainings emphasize, they are often "hidden" in plain sight, unbeknownst to the untrained eye).

Despite these challenges, organizations, industries, and statewide governments alike are increasingly recognizing the need for such training and have already begun to include policies and guidelines for recognizing and reporting sex trafficking. Some industries have even developed their own organizations and voluntary training programs to combat the issue from an occupation-specific standpoint. This includes the "Truckers Against Trafficking" organization within the trucking industry, the "Blue Lightning Initiative" and "Airline Ambassadors" within the airline industry, and "Convenience Stores Against Trafficking" (programmed by the anti-trafficking non-profit organization In Our Backyard). In some cases, initiatives have moved beyond voluntary programs to required trainings. For example, some states (i.e., California, Connecticut, Florida, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York) have mandated, or are in the process of mandating, trafficking training for hotel employees. Likewise, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) recently began requiring that flight attendants receive trafficking training (FAA Extension, Safety, and Security Act of 2016), with more specific legislative initiatives underway (e.g., Stop Trafficking on Planes [STOP]; S.2642).

Although the specific content if these training programs varies, even within-industry (Powell *et al.*, 2017), they follow a similar pattern, with most consisting of relatively brief online modules ranging in duration from 17 minutes to upwards of an hour or more. The primary goals of these training programs are to establish workers' awareness of sex trafficking, including knowledge of key indicators of a trafficking situation, and empowering them with information regarding immediate actions to take in such a circumstance (notifying a supervisor, calling law enforcement or a trafficking hotline). Many also include tangible or printable materials for workers to keep for reference (e.g., pocket reference cards for truckers and convenience store clerks). A similar training framework is followed by antitrafficking organizations producing more general (non-industry-specific) trainings (e.g., the Polaris Project, Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking [BEST]). Nevertheless, although some of these training considerations generalize across industries (e.g., awareness, hotline information), others such as behavioral indicators are industry specific

(e.g., frequent flow of men entering a hotel room), thus giving added value to the industry-specific trainings. To this end, some industries such as healthcare have gone further, calling for simulation-based trainings that provide a more realistic environment in which the face validity of the training is enhanced (e.g., Stoklosa, Lyman, Bohnert, & Mittel, 2017), and Airline Ambassadors in particular is known to provide in-person trainings to airline and airport personnel around the globe. In most cases, more intensive workshops are also available for managers and supervisors. In addition to covering general awareness and response issues, these programs more intensively educate managers on some of the broader issues relating to trafficking in their industry as well as their particular area, such as legal considerations (e.g., potential liability concerns relevant to the hotel industry, or patient confidentiality considerations within the healthcare field), as well as proactive measures to make their business less attractive to potential traffickers.

Despite the aforementioned best practice limitations often inherent in trafficking trainings, there are nonetheless specific best practice guidelines that remain realistic or could be slightly re-envisioned to suit the unique context of these trainings. Specifically, beyond just initial reliance on the impact on employees' perceptions of efficacy, utility, and intrinsic pretraining motivation as aforementioned, such trainings would also benefit from improving both actual and perceived quality via the four key tactics outlined by Hill, Lomas, and MacGregor (2003). In the case of sex trafficking trainings, such improvements would manifest as (a) relying on trafficking experts with positional power to facilitate the trainings, (b) making the trainings interactive with role playing and qualitatively varied behavioral modeling opportunities (Taylor, Russ-Eft, & Chan, 2005), (c) providing appropriate resources to enable skill utilization and transfer (e.g., secure reporting channels), and (d) enabling a supportive organizational culture ("aligning systems") that empowers employees to enact what they learn in the trainings without fear of negative personal or professional ramifications (e.g., refraining from "punishing" or shaming employees when a suspicion is unsubstantiated or a report yields a "false positive"). Going a step further, from the perspective of motivating transfer and demonstrating impact, such trainings may even benefit from outsourcing inspiration to the end recipient (Grant, 2008) of effective training transfer by way of incorporating personal testimonials from former trafficking victims/survivors.

Moreover, it is likewise critical to realize that trafficking training may generalize or transfer in other ways. For example, an employee trained to recognize the signs of sex trafficking, particularly those related to the mannerisms and physical characteristics of the victims, may also be more attuned to recognizing (and coming to the aid of) victims of domestic abuse. So in this way, we would do well to broaden our definition of impact to some extent, allowing for nontraditional measures of success more aligned with those used in humanitarian work psychology and less solely dependent on a strict quantitative metric, which makes for a complicating factor in something as covert as sex trafficking (Furnham, 2016). Indeed, it is difficult—sometimes impossible—to establish reliable criteria and metrics for what qualifies as "success" for such an underground issue. Nevertheless, it is for precisely this reason that we would all do well to consider how we can use our I-O skillsets for greater societal good in this way (Olson-Buchanan, Bryan, & Thompson, 2013). May we—just like the organizations and industries already implementing trafficking trainings—capitalize on our unique position in this space to help stamp out this wide-reaching social ill.

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