

# “The Game” as Sex Trafficking: Exploring Gender in Modern Day Slavery

Katelyn Henson

Sociology & Anthropology Department  
Linfield College



## INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking, or trafficking in persons (TIP), is a crime in which people profit from the exploitation of others through some form of labor (Polaris, 2015). This study specifically focuses on the system of domestic sex trafficking and uses gender theory to explain its perpetuation.

### Purpose of the Study:

- To explore the role of gender in sex trafficking, particularly at the micro-level.
- To provide a domestic and qualitative analysis of identities, relationships and structures that affect both men and women in the perpetuation of sex trafficking.

### A Brief Overview of Sex Trafficking:

- The difference between TIP and sex work is that TIP involves, as policy outlines, “force, fraud or coercion” (Human Rights, 2007).
- Traffickers make all profit of trafficked individual’s work.
- Traffickers subject TIP individuals to:
  - Physical and mental abuse
  - Social isolation
  - Confiscation of identification documents
  - Threats against trafficked individuals’ loved ones

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Race, class and gender are social constructions that are factors in the perpetuation of TIP. According to Clawson, Dutch and Solomon (2009), race and class play a prominent role in the continuation of TIP because:

- Many trafficked individuals are from different countries of origin and are illegally transported for labor work in the U.S.
- TIP individuals tend to come from poor, working class families who live in communities with high crime activity.

Gender has also been studied with regard to TIP; however, its extent in certain forms of trafficking and how gender roles affect identities and relationships in sex trafficking is yet to be studied.

### Race:

- Social stigmas placed on minorities create a higher likelihood of minorities becoming susceptible to becoming trafficked (Elabor-Idemudia, 2003; Greer, 2013).

### Class:

- Children:** Class and age have been found to be factors that determine the likelihood of an individual becoming trafficked. The younger the individual, and the lower his or her socioeconomic status, the more likely a person is to be susceptible to becoming trafficked (Javidan, 2011).
- Adults:** Low socioeconomic status can prompt people to become involved in trafficking in order to make a better life for themselves (this often happens in developing countries; Danailova-Trainer & Laczko [2010]).
  - In the US, although poverty may be a factor in some peoples’ experiences with trafficking, this is not necessarily an indicator of overall susceptibility. Many men and women from middle-to upper-class families have also become involved in trafficking (International, 2008).

### Gender:

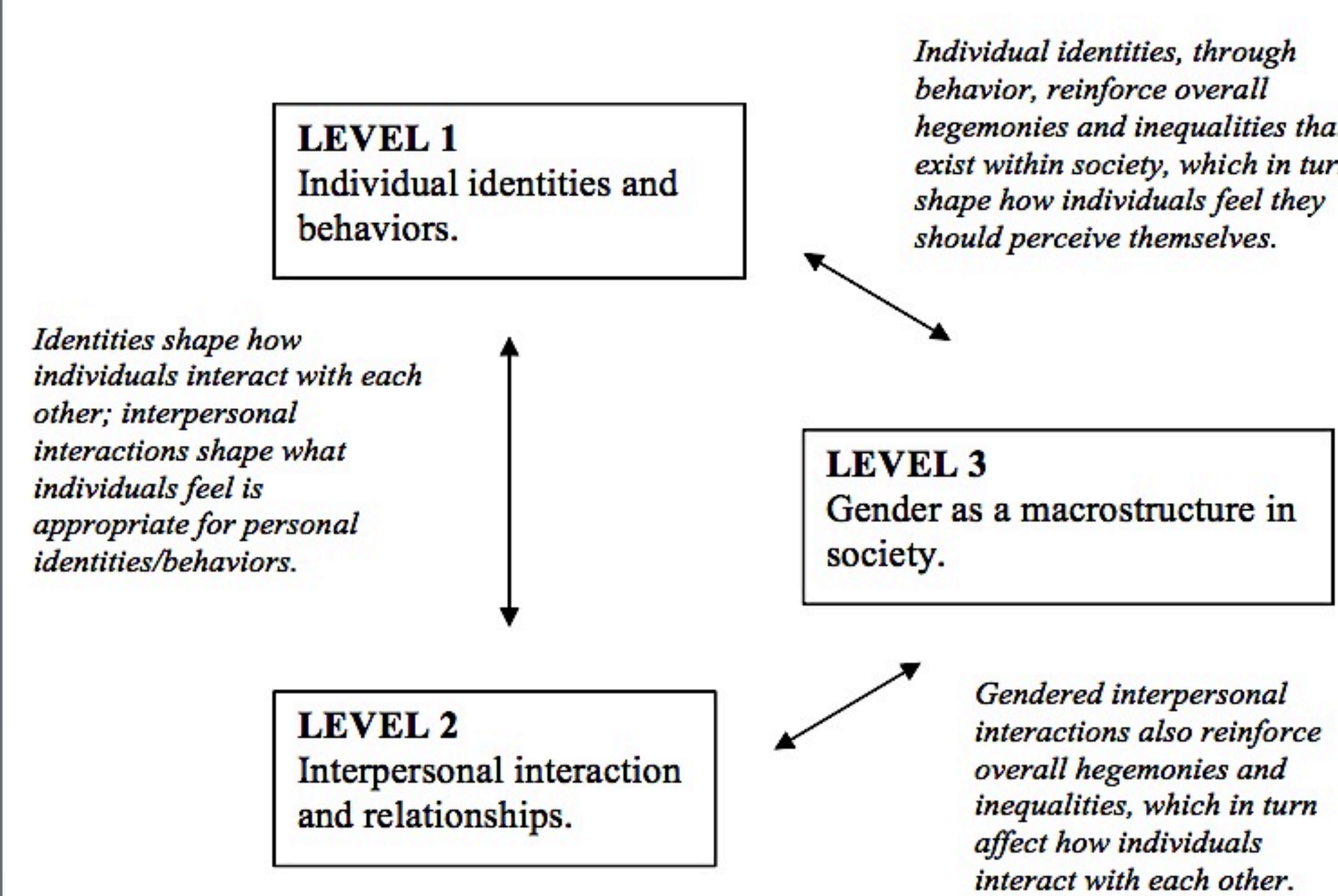
- Micro-Level Approach:** Several studies have found that micro-level approaches focusing on specific individuals’ experiences have yielded more results as to how gender inequalities in society affect and perpetuate sex trafficking (Snadjr, 2013; Vindhya & Swathi Dev, 2011; Weitzer, 2013).
- Males in Sex Trafficking:** Males as consumers of sex have mainly been studied through economic theory (Teifenbrun, 2002; Yen, 2008). Some research addresses economic reasons behind selling individuals in sex trafficking, but, again, most of it uses supply and demand economic theory and does not address how masculinity, race or class affect participation in sex trafficking (Troshynski & Blank, 2008).
- Therefore, exploratory studies are needed to discover how gender affects not only the victim’s role in sex trafficking, but the trafficker’s as well.

## THEORY

**Hegemonic Masculinity:** The concept of hegemony – a powerful, all-encompassing force that overshadows its societal counterparts – allows me to identify gendered inequalities in sex trafficking.

- Qualities:** (see Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 2008; Kivel, 2007; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009)
  - Discourse involves men empowering themselves by putting down other gendered identities (i.e. “fag” and “like a girl”).
  - Men use competition to prove their masculinity.
  - Masculinity is defined by success in the workplace.
  - Masculinity is defined by success with women and sex.
  - Maintaining masculinity involves a strong sense of self-control, and maintaining control of women.
  - Hegemonic masculinity may be related to the construction of “emphasized femininity,” or the feminine reaction to hegemonic masculinity through the construction of a hyper-sexualized, ideal woman that fits within the hegemonic, masculine ideologies.

**Gender as a Multi-Leveled Structure:** I suggest that women and men involved in sex trafficking reinforce gender structures through their individual behavior, relationships and as people in the industry. In other words, I will explore how gender exists on three interrelated levels, as Risman (1998) claims:



## METHODS

### Participants:

- Four survivor participants, or women who were previously trafficked: Shelby, Caroline, Vivian, and Jody
- One law enforcement official from the Portland Police Bureau: Dan (an officer with over 20 years of experience in the prostitution division)

### Interviews:

- Two-to three-hour in-depth interviews – focused on their narratives.
- For survivor participants, I asked:
  - How they became trafficked, and factors that led up to trafficking.
  - How they were treated and the activities they were involved in during their time as trafficked individuals.
  - Their overall perceptions about themselves, traffickers, and consumers of sex.
- For the law enforcement official, I asked questions addressing men in trafficking:
  - How traffickers become “pimps” and consumers become “johns”
  - How both parties treat women, and what kinds of activities both parties do within sex trafficking.
  - How traffickers and consumers view the overall trafficking industry with relation to their perceived identities.
- I used Snadjr (2013) and Weitzer’s (2011) approach to studying TIP: avoiding the search for universal laws by taking a micro-level, domestic approach to data analysis.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

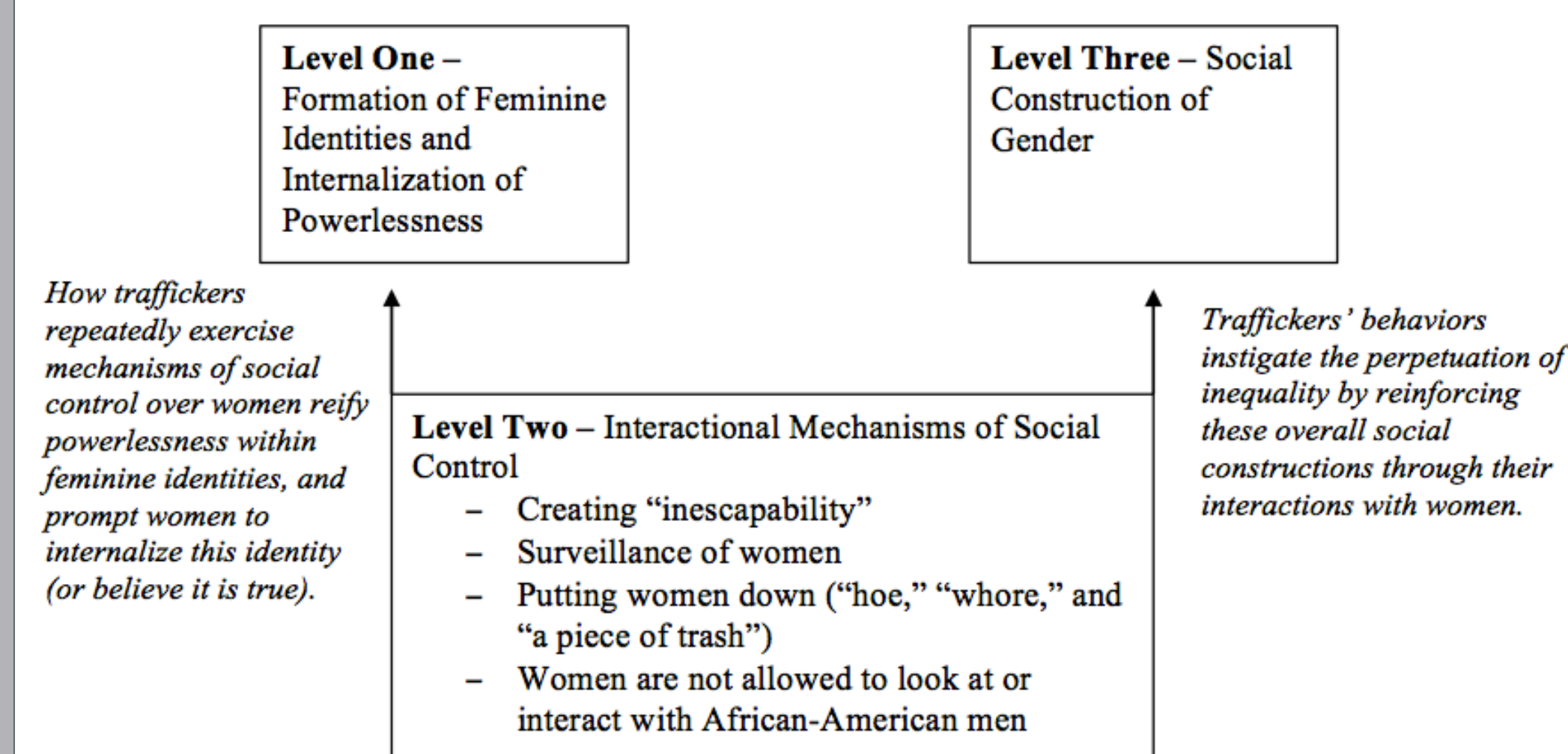
All three levels of gender that Lorber (1994) and Risman (1998) highlight were evident in these narratives, and within the levels, hegemonic masculinity was evident as well. Participants’ narratives elucidated important aspects of how gendered identities (Level One), interactions (Level Two), and the overall macrostructures in sex trafficking (Level Three) are connected, constructed and reinforced. They also shed light on how the industry is affected by hegemonic masculinity.

### Level One: Gendered Identities

- Identities within sex trafficking were affected by: socialization, internalization of powerlessness, and hegemonic masculinity within traffickers’ and consumers’ identities.
- The importance of socialization before trafficking:** ALL informants reported to have had difficult childhoods for the following reasons:
  - Sexual assault and/or dysfunctional home lives (physical/verbal abuse, poverty, childhood trauma)
- Tr trafficked individuals’ identities/subsequent internalizations:**
  - Needing a male figure’s approval, and females internalizing a hyper-sexualized, powerless identity.
  - Hegemonic ideologies (created by traffickers) affect this.
- Traffickers’ identities:**
  - Status based on financial success, control over women and self control. All three of these aspects are indicative of hegemonic masculinity at work in sex trafficking.
- Consumers’ identities:**
  - Because consumers are males, they are able to disassociate themselves from participating in sex trafficking, thus creating an excuse for their behavior.

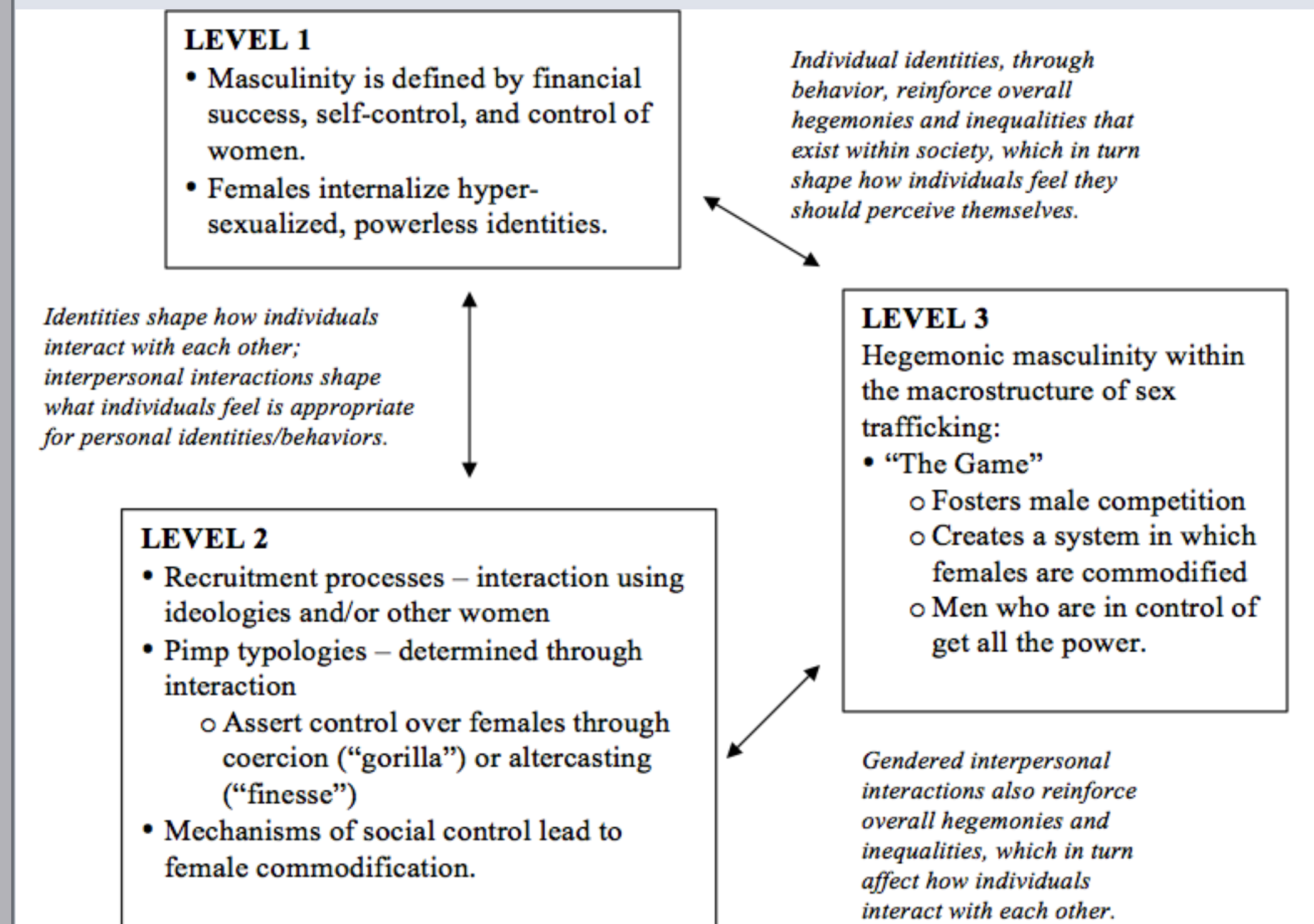
### Level Two: Gendered Interactions

- Traffickers use mechanisms of social control as they interact with women, thus perpetuating sex trafficking at the interactional level.



### Level Three: Hegemonic Masculinity and “The Game”

- Participants called sex trafficking “The Game.”



## CONCLUSION

Risman’s (1998) theory of gender as structure is evident in sex trafficking, and it can explain how sex trafficking is perpetuated under social constructions of gender at the identity, interactional and macro-structure levels.

- Females’ internalization of powerless, hyper-sexualized identities keeps them working in this highly unequal industry instead of challenging it.
- Traffickers’ perceptions of what it means to “be a man” in sex trafficking is indicative of how hegemonic masculinity manifests itself in this industry.
  - There is also a creation of multi-status masculinities when comparing consumers and traffickers through hegemonic masculinity.
- Traffickers’ use of mechanisms of social control are the media through which the *implementation* of Level 3 ideologies and Level 1 identities create and perpetuate sex trafficking.
- Hegemonic masculinity ultimately affects the macrostructures of sex trafficking (i.e. how the concept of “The Game” is created).

### For Future Research:

- Further exploration into how capitalism/the U.S. economy affects the perpetuation of gendered inequalities in sex trafficking:
  - How do traffickers use mechanisms of social control to create a capitalist system that perpetuates gendered inequalities in sex trafficking?
- Further exploration into how hegemonic masculinity is manifested within the anti-trafficking movement:
  - How do the social constructions of gender within law enforcement, policy and other anti-trafficking efforts affect (and possibly inhibit) the eradication of sex trafficking?

### Final Thoughts:

This study explored the structures of gender and hegemonic masculinity within sex trafficking. My research sheds light into the inner-workings of gender in sex trafficking, which is a crucial component to understanding how to combat its perpetuation. However, this is a purely foundational study; academics must continue to explore other ways in which gender manifests itself in sex trafficking, anti-trafficking policies, and the anti-trafficking movement in order to truly contest its existence and achieve eradication.

### Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank the Linfield College Sociology & Anthropology Department for making this research project possible – especially Dr. Amy Orr, my thesis advisor, who was extremely patient and gracious to me throughout my entire project. I would also like to thank my parents, Bud and Cynthia Henson, for instilling in me a strong moral compass, and for telling me to become an activist for those who are not able to fight for themselves. Lastly, I thank all of my participants for sharing life stories for the sake of research. I owe this project to them.

## REFERENCES

- Clawson, H. J., Dutch, N. M., Salomon, A., & Grace, L. G. (2009). *Study of IHHS programs serving human trafficking victims: Final report* (Department of Health and Human Services). Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/pkkr32>
- Connell, R.W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Connell, R.W. & Messerschmidt, J.W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19, 829-859.
- Danailova-Trainer, G. & Laczko, F. (2010). Trafficking in persons and development: Towards greater policy coherence. *International Migration*, 48(4), 38-83.
- Elabor-Idemudia, P. (2003). Race and gender analyses of trafficking: A case study of Nigeria. *Canadian Women's Studies*, 22(3-4), 116-123.
- Greer, B. T. (2013). Hiding behind tribal sovereignty: Rooting out human trafficking in Indian country. *The Journal of Gender, Race & Justice*, 16, 453-482.
- Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley (2007). *Hidden Slaves: New Politics*, 11(3), 11-15. Retrieved from Elsehost MasterFile Premier.
- International Office of Migration (2008). *World migration report 2008: Managing labour mobility in the evolving global economy*. Geneva.
- Javidan, P. (2012). Global class and the commercial-sexual exploitation of children: Toward a multidimensional understanding. *Columbia Journal of Race and Law*, 1(3), 365-381.
- Kimmel, M. (2008). *Gayland: The perilous world where boys become men: Understanding the critical years between 16 and 26*. New York: HarperCollins
- Kivel, P. (2007). *Act like a man box*. Retrieved from [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com)
- Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of gender*. Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press.
- Pascoe, C. (2007). *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- The Polaris Project (2014). *Policy advocacy*. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/l26d2o8>
- Risman, B. J. (1998). Gender as structure. In Risman, B. (1999). *Gender vergergo: American families in transition* (13-31). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Schrock, D. & Schwalbe, M. (2009). Men, masculinity and manhood acts. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35, 277-295.
- Siskin, A. & Wyler, L. S. (2013). *Trafficking in Persons: U.S. policy and issues for Congress* (CRS Report No. RL34317). Retrieved from <http://www.crs.org/congress>
- Snadjr, E. (2013). Beneath the master narrative: Human trafficking, myths of sexual slavery and ethnographic realities. *Dialect Anthropology*, 37, 229-256.
- Tiefenbrun, S. W. (2002). Sex sells but drugs don't talk: Trafficking of women sex workers and an economic solution. *Thomas Jefferson Law Review*, 16(1), 129-165.
- Troshynski, E. L. & Blank, J. K. (2008). Sex trafficking: An exploratory study interviewing traffickers. *Trends Organized Crime*, 11, 30-41.
- Vindhya, U. & Swathi Dev, V. (2011). Survivors of sex trafficking in Andhra Pradesh: Evidence and testimony. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 18, 129-165.
- Weitzer, R. (2012). Sex trafficking and the sex industry: The need for evidence-based theory and legislation. *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 101(4), 1337-1369.
- Yen, J. (2008). Of vice and men: A new approach to eradicating sex trafficking by reducing male demand through educational programs and abolitionist legislation. *The Journal of Law & Criminology*, 98(2), 653-686.

Photos by Dennis Brekke & Jake Guild.