

Public Perceptions of Human Trafficking in Moldova*

Percepciones Públicas del Tráfico Ilegal de Personas en Moldavia

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Abstract. Human trafficking is a widely studied phenomenon. Comparing public perceptions of trafficking to institutional (i.e. the academy, governmental and non-governmental organizations) perceptions gives a richer understanding of the problem. The data for this study were collected in and around Chisinau, Moldova in the summer of 2004. Public discourse provides a more intimate “portraiture” of the issue, but the public also demonstrated a complex level of understanding of this social problem in this study. Its view is juxtaposed against an institutional view of human trafficking as explored through a literature review. Combining institutional and public perceptions and knowledge of a social problem is helpful in not only establishing a more thorough understanding of the social problem and guiding policy decisions, but in exploring the experiences victims may face at the community level.

Keywords: human trafficking, institutional perceptions, public perceptions, victims and community.

Resumen. Aunque el tráfico ilegal de personas es un fenómeno ampliamente estudiado, la comparación entre las percepciones públicas y las institucionales (es decir, del mundo académico, el gobierno y las organizaciones no gubernamentales) puede aportar una mejor comprensión del problema. Los datos del presente estudio fueron recogidos en Chisinau y alrededores, Moldavia, durante el verano del 2004. El discurso público proporciona un “retrato” más íntimo del problema, pero también pone de manifiesto su gran complejidad. La perspectiva pública del tráfico ilegal de personas se yuxtapone a la perspectiva institucional como revela una revisión de la literatura al respecto. Combinar percepciones y conocimientos públicos e institucionales de un problema social ayuda no sólo a establecer una comprensión más rigurosa del problema y a guiar las decisiones políticas, sino también a explorar las experiencias a las que las víctimas se enfrentan en sus comunidades.

Palabras clave: percepciones institucionales, percepciones públicas, tráfico ilegal de personas, víctimas y comunidad.

In recent years, academic research has surged on trafficking in persons. However, most of that research focuses on an overall description of the magnitude of the problem (Anonymous, 2003; Aronowitz, 2001; Dugert, 2004; Landesman, 2004; Stephenson, 2010), description of or calls for changes in policies to combat trafficking and/or aid victims (Butcher, 2003; Global Survival Network, 1997; Guth, 2010; Zimmerman & Watts, 2004), push or pull factors which facilitate/create trafficking (Anderson & Davidson, 2003; Hughes, 2003a), or a combination of these facets of trafficking (Bertone, 2004; Haynes, 2004; Hughes, 2000; Kartusch, 2001).

Although the aforementioned cases are important areas of research in trafficking, there are gaps that need to be filled in the existing literature to further actionable knowledge on human trafficking. One

important aspect of the issue of trafficking is public sentiment. Creating anti-trafficking and victim service measures are only the initial steps toward fighting this crime. Vigilance and support from the public are also essential. Furthermore, if the public perceives victims negatively, then organizations, governments and activists have an additional hurdle to overcome when combating trafficking. Just as domestic violence as a social problem faced the same issue when it started to emerge into the public sphere in the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. (Johnson & Sigler, 1995), anti-trafficking activists might learn from the lessons overcome by advocates speaking out about this previously ignored, if not accepted, social phenomenon. Finally, many victims of trafficking are repatriated to their countries of origin, many returning to their home communities. Understanding public perceptions may give us a better idea of how they might be treated and are able to reintegrate into society. Public perceptions must be understood before social norms can be targeted by changes in policies, as was the case with domestic violence in the U.S. (Salazar, Baker, Price, & Carlin, 2003).

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This article focuses on how respondents from the public view, describe and explain human trafficking in a source country of human trafficking, Moldova. The results of this study are juxtaposed to what could be called an “institutional” perception of human trafficking. This perception is offered via the mechanism of a literature review. It overviews how the academy, government and non-governmental organizations “see” the problem. As can be expected, at the institutional level trafficking is seen as a vastly complex social problem with structural (macro) level causes. The public generally sees social problems in a more intimate (micro) way. Combining public and institutional knowledge and perceptions helps to develop a better understanding of trafficking in all its complexity, and may provide insight into how victims of trafficking may be treated by their local communities if they repatriate.

Trafficking can be classified more broadly as interpersonal violence (symbolic, emotional, mental, and physical). There are other studies of public perceptions of interpersonal violence that approach the issue quantitatively and deductively (Johnson and Sigler, 1996; Herzog, 2007; Herzog, 2008). Models for these studies look at how social norms (Herzog, 2007) and specific national histories (Johnson and Sigler, 1996) influence public perceptions of interpersonal violence. Herzog (2007) used the consensus and conflict models of public perception to drive his study. However, this article takes a different approach. It is qualitative and inductive and explores the richness of public knowledge and perceptions of human trafficking.

The study most similar to the one at hand examined public perceptions of trafficked women in Israel (Herzog, 2008). Like the two studies mentioned above, it was quantitative and deductive and employed a large sample size ($n = 1,650$). Herzog found support for his hypothesis that the public will view typical interpersonal crimes (such as rape and homicide) as serious crimes and therefore expect severe punishment for offenders. However, he additionally hypothesized that trafficking in women for prostitution would be viewed less seriously than the aforementioned crimes. He did not find support for this second hypothesis, and found that even respondents with traditional patriarchal orientations viewed trafficking in women as a serious crime. The author notes as a limitation to the study that it did not allow for exploration among respondents. Using a semi-structured interview, I was able to delve more deeply into the respondents’ understanding and perception of human trafficking. Also, the focus of Herzog’s (2008) study was on the trafficking of women for the sex trade. I asked about human trafficking in general (including men, women and children) for various reasons (sex trade, labor, organs). Finally, in contrast to Israel, a destination country, Moldova has been a major source country for victims of trafficking.

Trafficking in Moldova

Moldova is a small, landlocked country of the former Soviet Union. It rests between Ukraine and Romania, and for hundreds of years has been shifted from Romanian to Russian (and Soviet) control. One of the poorest countries in Europe, Moldova is considered to have one of the highest rates of trafficking victims in South Eastern Europe (Clert & Gomart, 2004 cited in World Bank, 2004; IOM, 2004b; IOM/SIDA, 2003; Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, 2004), and since the breakup of the Soviet Union, South Eastern Europe emerged as a major source region in the global trade in humans (Kartusch, 2001). It is impossible to put an exact number on how many persons are trafficked. Even estimates are guesses at best. The government of Moldova indicates that 600,000 people of the total 4.3 million in population are living outside of the country, but there is no indication of the precise percentage of that group that is suspected of being trafficked (IOM/SIDA, 2003). Conversely, organizations such as IOM (International Organization for Migration) in Moldova publish figures of those they have actually counted. They reported that between 2000-2004, they provided support services to 1,535 returned female (including minors) victims of sex trafficking (IOM, 2004a). That figure alone is astonishing, but it represents only the number of known cases. One must expect the number of female trafficking victims for the sex trade from Moldova to be much higher. Also, this figure does not illuminate the magnitude of trafficking in other forms or the number of male victims involved.

Macro-level causes of trafficking

Institutions, especially the academy, typically focus on macro-level causes of trafficking, which can be categorized generally as “push” and “pull” factors of trafficking. The majority of this literature review focuses on these push and pull factors to tease out the systemic causes of trafficking. The results and discussion section of this article will provide a more intimate knowledge as offered by the public. However, there are parallels between their understanding of the problem and an institutional understanding of the problem.

Push factors. Wealthy/stable countries are typically recipient locales while poor/unstable countries are often origin locales for trafficking victims. However, poor and unstable countries are becoming receiving and transition countries as well (IOM, 2004b). Kartusch (2001) identified poverty, economic and political transition and conflict as the key “push” factors that drive people from their home countries in South Eastern Europe. Watts and Zimmerman (2002) cite the same factors, and include social inequity between countries as an additional cause for trafficking worldwide.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, third world countries ceased to be the only regions of the world overwhelmed by poverty. In survey results published by the MiraMed Institute (1999), 54% of initial respondents ($n = 1,391$) considered poverty to be the most pressing issue for women in former Soviet states. In short, the pool of potential trafficking victims increased with the end of the Cold War and former communist countries' descent into poverty.

Yablokova (2004) cites the "easing of travel regulations" among reasons that trafficking became an issue for the former Soviet Union. That statement is problematic. First, there is no information about cases of trafficking during the Soviet era. As with other social problems, the lack of official documentation does not provide sufficient evidence that a problem did not exist. The communist party worked very hard to create at least the perception of utopia. For example, prostitution for a long time was not identified by the Soviet government because it did not approve of its existence in Soviet society. Thus, on paper, it was not an issue under communism, but in reality, prostitution was engaged in by Soviet citizens, even by members of the Communist Party (Marcinkeviciene & Praspaliauskiene, 2003). As such, the public might be in a position to give more information. Although it is anecdotal, accounts of trafficking during the Soviet period by community members potentially provides a better understanding than what official documents might suggest. Second, easing *emigration* policy does not mean easing the travel process. The borders might have loosened for former Soviet citizens to leave, but that does not necessarily translate to easing *immigration* processes.

Pull factors. The demand for cheap labor and sexual services as contributors to the trafficking process began to receive more attention as the phenomenon of trafficking became better understood. IOM (Anderson & Davidson, 2003) officially recognized the need to understand this side of trafficking with an important pilot study conducted in Sweden, Thailand, India, Denmark, Italy, and Hong Kong. They interviewed domestic work employers and patrons of the sex trade to search for factors that fueled the demand for trafficked labor. Reportedly, the methodology was complicated, and their findings had to be considered with caution because respondents would be implicating themselves in socially and ethically undesirable activities. However, the responses were quite telling of attitudes towards sex workers and domestic servants. For example, one respondent (an Indian banker) who openly admitted to patronizing the sex trade, and knew that many prostitutes were trafficked, had no sympathy for them. He concluded that if violence was committed against the prostitute, then it was her fault because she had probably "cheated" her client or given him a "sub-standard service" (p.24). Many domestic employers reported that they did not like employing native work-

ers because they were "too spoiled" and had too many social protections as citizens (p. 30). For this study, pull factors will be uncovered by community members after they have heard stories of or have known people who were lured abroad by promises of work opportunities. At the micro level, they will likely share stories that detail these processes.

The most contentious topic debated here is the role of prostitution in trafficking. As indicated above, sex trafficking is focused on more emphatically than other forms of trafficking, so naturally, sex work becomes an issue of debate. One primary question is: does the legalization/decriminalization of sex work abate or exacerbate sex trafficking? People within and out of the feminist movement have thus far failed to come to an agreement on this issue (Bertone, 2004; Shrage 1994). Some scholars and activists argue that countries that tolerate prostitution create the demand for sex trafficking (Hughes, 2003a, 2000; Anonymous, 2003; Leuchtag, 2003; Landesman, 2004;). Their argument is simply that if sex work can be seen as a legitimate form of business, demand will rise for sex workers, thus increasing the incentive to "recruit" more women/girls into the trade. Leuchtag (2003) cited the example of the Netherlands, where 80% of the prostitutes who work in legal brothels were trafficked.

Others argue that it is intolerance and the failure of governments and society to recognize sex work as a legitimate form of labor that facilitates sex trafficking (Butcher, 2003; Block, 2004). Their position is that the more underground the market, the more dangerous it is for workers within that trade, as the illegality of the profession holds prostitutes in fear of criminal prosecution. Furthermore, they underscore the difference between prostitution (a "choice") and sexual slavery, and argue that to criminalize the prostitute is to keep her in fear of seeking help from authorities (Butcher, 2003).

The debate over prostitution's role in sex work remains very much a political one because there is no conclusive evidence on the impact of legal or illegal sex work on human trafficking. (Bertone, 2004). It is a disagreement that is not likely to come to any solution because of political agendas and passionate viewpoints. Realistically, the sex trade will continue to exist regardless of its legal status (Anderson & Davidson, 2003). As a result, scholars, activists and even governments who attempt to minimize the exploitation of the sex trade while protecting sex workers. Vietnam and Sweden decriminalized the prostitute and only penalize traffickers, pimps and consumers (johns) (Leuchtag, 2003). This may have a more direct effect on social norms than implementing sweeping policies on sex work.

More generally, social norms and behaviors tolerated within society can be considered as a pull factor, to the extent that they affect demand. That is, social norms can justify the exploitation of immigrants.

Discrimination might lead a society's members to be less concerned with the state of certain ethnic or racial groups, women or members of lower socioeconomic status (SES), which can lead them to ignore instances of people being used for cheap labor (Anderson & Davidson, 2003). Gaining an understanding of the public's perception of sex work in general may give better insight into how sex trafficking victims may be perceived and treated.

Immigration policy. Less restrictive immigration policies as a potential solution to trafficking (Haynes, 2004; Bertone, 2004; Kartusch, 2001; Global Survival Network, 1997; Anonymous, 2003) are often pursued by progressive activists and by academics, but less supported by many governments. The rationale behind this theory incorporates push/pull and situational factors. Governments that typically focus on trafficking as an issue of illegal immigration look to more restrictive immigration policies as a solution (Haynes, 2004). Interestingly, this position is often echoed by the public at large, as is the case in this study. Public perception often leans toward penalizing the immigrant and therefore favoring more restrictive immigration policies. Scholars within the liberalized immigration solution (LIS) camp, on the other hand, consider this tactic to further exacerbate the problem. They argue that it is too simple of an explanation of why people are vulnerable to trafficking. Push and pull factors alone do not explain how people become vulnerable to traffickers, but rather why they migrate. By also considering the conditions of migration, research might provide additional insight into vulnerability. Simply put, when people seek to migrate but are not offered the legal means to do so, they may seek irregular migration schemes (Kartusch, 2001). Traffickers, including corrupt officials, are able to take advantage of the demand to migrate and prey on the illegal status of migrants, which leaves them with limited options pre-, mid- and post-migration. It also creates an increased reliance on the person or persons who facilitate border crossing (Global Survival Network, 1997; Haynes, 2004).

Fortunately, some governments are considering the advice of LIS proponents. Italy identified that a significant number of its trafficking victims were originating from Albania. The government's strategy was to offer more work visas (i.e., increased opportunity for legal migration) to Albanians seeking to immigrate to Italy (Haynes, 2004; Kartusch, 2001). In addition, upon IOM's urging, Italy created a database which allowed Italian employers to match needs with Albanians seeking to immigrate (Kartusch, 2001). A similar agreement to protect Moldovan immigrants and help them find legitimate employment was signed by the Italian and Moldovan governments on November 27, 2003 (IOM/SIDA, 2003). This is an important step, as recent polls show that over 80% of respondents in Moldova within the 18-29 year age bracket would leave the country if it were a possibility. Over half of all respon-

dents (n = 1149) from all age groups indicated the same desire (Public Policy Institute, 2002).

In most academic articles, a review of the literature identifies present gaps in research and situates the authors' hypotheses and/or research questions. Then participant responses (i.e., data) are used to expand theories, and/or confirm or challenge hypotheses. In this study, I juxtapose "institutional" knowledge via a literature review against "community" knowledge via a broad semi-structured interview. It is common for persons to individualize complex social problems. However, this study shows how community members understand the multiple layers of human trafficking, as well as how they contextualize their understanding in a specific setting. This approach can sharpen institutional knowledge of social problems and guide policy recommendations in specific settings.

Method

This article is part of a larger mixed-methods study of victim blaming. For this article, I will focus on the qualitative and inductive components of the study. Although the larger study included multiple instruments, I will focus on the results of semi-structured interviews. The goal of the semi-structured interview was to gain a better understanding of trafficking by a public whose home country is a major source of trafficking. The initial part of the interview gauged general perceptions and knowledge before progressing to more leading, close-ended questions.

Snowball sampling is commonly used among former Soviet populations. It has been my experience that outsiders are not trusted unless referred to by an insider (i.e. someone from the community). Through snowball sampling and contacting multiple gatekeepers, I interviewed thirty Moldovan citizens in and around the capital, Chisinau. My primary gatekeeper and translator was found through a friend of a friend. She had no background in the study of trafficking. In fact, she was a medical doctor who turned to translation work so she could earn more money. She introduced me to other gatekeepers in her apartment building, at work, and through friends. Importantly, gatekeepers and respondents were not contacted because of their knowledge of trafficking. This process facilitated a random entry into various networks of people.

One limitation to this study is that it is not generalizable to the larger Moldovan population, but it does give a variety of rich insights into public perceptions in Moldova. The sample was purposive in that I ensured people from varying educational, occupational, social and ethnic backgrounds, and urban and rural areas were interviewed, which enabled a cross-sectional analysis of Moldovan residents' attitudes and perceptions (Tables 1&2). The only criterion for inclusion was that the respondent was an adult and had at least

heard of human trafficking. I also informed gatekeepers that I wanted as diverse a population as possible. Therefore, they contacted work colleagues and friends as well as neighbors.

Former Soviet cities are not organized in the same way that Western cities are organized. The Soviet era was not a classless society, and people with ranges of incomes and education levels lived in the same apartment buildings. Although gentrification and segregation are emerging in post-Soviet cities, the Soviet legacy persists (Alden and Crow, 1998; Gentile and Sjoberg, 2006). Therefore, when gatekeepers turned to neighbors, they were approaching people of different socio-economic statuses. Also, gatekeepers contacted friends, relatives, and co-workers, keeping in mind my criteria for obtaining a mix of ethnicities, education levels and occupations. Potential respondents were told that I wanted to know about their impression of human trafficking in Moldova, that the interview would be conducted in a location of their choosing, and that their identity would remain confidential and I would not keep any contact information about them. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the university's review board allowed me to get verbal consent for the interviews so that the respondent's name would not be connected with research study in any way. This led to another limitation in the research. Because of the sensitivity of the issue, reliability via member check was not possible.

My interpreter was a native Russian and Moldovan (Romanian) speaker. She was also fluent in English.

Interviews were conducted in a location of the participant's choosing. Most were conducted in their apartments, some were conducted at my interpreter's apartment, and three took place in a community playground close to the participants' places of employment. I compensated participants with the equivalent of three (3) US dollars. In Moldova, that is about the price of a music CD, or enough to compensate people for their time, but not so much that they were coerced into participating. I found that most people were keen to participate. Some even refused payment and indicated that they were simply happy to speak with me about this issue. All respondents were assigned a pseudonym, which is used in this article.

A semi-structured interview format encouraged participants to raise other issues not related to human trafficking, but about life more generally in Moldova, so that their perceptions of trafficking could be understood in a richer context. A purely deductive approach can hint towards new directions for research, but unfortunately this approach can create a "tunnel vision" in research that can be limiting (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Therefore, I kept the dialogue open and allowed for themes to emerge during the interview process. At first, I asked the respondents to describe what "human trafficking" meant to them, and then I moved on to more specific questions. These questions included how they perceived traffickers and those who were trafficked. Appendix A includes the list of semi-structured interview questions. The interview questions were designed to obtain

Table 1

Study Sample (N = 30)				
	Male	Female		
Gender	11 (36%)	19 (63%)		
Age	18-30 8 (27%)	31-45 12 (40%)	46-60 7 (23%)	> 60 3 (10%)
	Professional/ Technical School	Some University	University	
Highest Level of Education Completed	8 (27%)	3 (10%)	19 (63%)	
	Moldovan/ Romanian	Russian	Ukrainian	Bulgarian
Ethnicity	15 (50%)	9 (30%)	4 (13%)	2 (6%)

Table 2

Occupation [Study Sample (N = 30)]			
Aerobics instructor	Electrician	Masseuse/babysitter	Sales manager
Boiler operator/electrician	Engineer (4)	Medical registrar	Salesperson
Choreographer	Fashion designer/university professor	Nurse (3)	Student
Doctor (2)	Housewife	Pensioner (3)	Unemployed
Electrical machinist (2)	Jurist (legal advisor)	Publicity photographer	University professor (2)

a broad sense of how community members perceived human trafficking in its many dimensions. Did respondents focus on making it an issue of the individual, or did they identify more complex structures involved in the problem? During the interview, I did not use terms like “victim”, “criminal” or other leading terms. Respondents were asked “hypothetically” about human trafficking, but many of them (N = 11) drew on personal experiences of what they had witnessed about trafficking. Others cited sources such as the popular press or government/NGO.

Analysis

Data were coded using inductive processes. Interviews were recorded in English and transcribed by the author. I then used a line-by-line open coding process via N6 software. N6 is qualitative research software that allows users to manage large amounts of text data and create coding matrices that help develop connections across interview transcripts. For example, I noticed that more punitive attitudes towards victims of trafficking were related to respondents who focused on the “micro” or individual-level aspects when defining trafficking. After the initial coding process was completed, I reviewed the coding terms to determine what substantive areas emerged. These areas included defining trafficking, trafficker description, “victim” description, and causes of trafficking at the macro and micro levels. I then recoded the transcripts with these substantive areas in mind. Because of the specificity of the topic and the Moldovan/Post-Soviet culture, I was unable to secure a second researcher, thus I was not able to assess inter-reliability, which is an additional limitation in this study.

Results and Discussion

Institutions tend to consider social problems by focusing on their systemic causes. However, such an approach does not reveal anything about what actually happens at the community level and how the issue is perceived by the public. The focus of this section will be on respondents’ understandings and perceptions of the problem, and some connections will be made to what was reviewed above as the “institutional perception” of human trafficking. There was substantial overlap between what institutions have to “say” about trafficking and what respondents told me about trafficking.

Trafficking defined and experienced by respondents

Although many participants defined trafficking as involuntary servitude that could affect men, women

and children and involve various forms of labor, when most respondents began talking about trafficking, they tended to gravitate to referring to the trafficking of women for prostitution. The other two most common types of trafficking referred to were organ trafficking and the illegal adoption of children. It was clear that my respondents were familiar with the problem and concerned about it. Of the thirty respondents in the study, eleven had some personal connection to trafficking. Whatever their understanding of trafficking, they believed that it included coercion or force. One reason that Moldovan respondents may have a clearer understanding of trafficking is that public education campaigns and media coverage have been more prevalent in Eastern Europe than in the United States. Also, because they live in a country with a high incidence of trafficking, they are more likely to be exposed to the issue personally.

Timor (31), an engineer from Chisinau, claimed, “Everybody knows about it... Everybody in our country has been touched by this problem, not always directly, but maybe indirectly.” One respondent, Oleg (62) a pensioner from Chisinau, described himself as the “unwitting witness” to the beginning of what could have been a trafficking process. He was in the hospital for a procedure and overheard nurses who made “menial wages” discuss a pair of expensive boots one of the nurses was wearing. The nurse with the “luxurious” boots explained that her friend was able to purchase them after working only a couple of days abroad. She gave the name and number of her friend’s pimp in Turkey who could arrange for them to get work abroad. The interesting aspect here is how young people are lured with the promise of expensive consumer goods. It is not clear if these young women would be true victims of trafficking, or if they would be able to work as prostitutes and leave when they chose, but it is clear from this occasion that the promises of wealth are a very strong selling point to people in marginal situations. In this case, these young women had employment and no apparent lack of food or shelter, but were attracted by the appeal of luxury goods.

Yulia (48), a doctor from Chisinau, said she became suspicious of trafficking when she was asked to complete some health certificates for a group of young women so they could travel abroad. She reported that in her office she had, “a group of attractive girls who were presented as dancers, and it made me really alarmed. They had no documents and I was forced to go out of my office and ask their manager for their identities.”

Mary (54), a pensioner from Moldovka (pseudonym for a village near Chisinau) explained that there were a number of traffickers in her village alone. As she stated, “in our village, there are of course some people who sell people abroad.” Lilya (65), a pensioner from Chisinau, explained the risky situation into which her acquaintance found herself. She was not trafficked, but

she was cheated while trying to immigrate to Italy for work:

(O)ne of my acquaintances, she personally appealed to one private firm to help her go to Italy, and she paid all the sum, which was rather great, and after that she couldn't get either her money back or go abroad, she got cheated, just here, not abroad.

The most troubling story came from Lydia (26), a fashion designer and university professor from Chisinau. She described the following victimization of one of her friends:

One of my girlfriends was kidnapped and sold by her boyfriend. He sold her because he was in debt in Macedonia.... This girl was just sitting in a restaurant in Macedonia with her boyfriend and he promised to get some money from the bankomat and to come back, but left her alone in the restaurant. After that, some people came to her with bodyguards and informed her that she had been sold for her boyfriend's debt, and so she got into this situation, she became a prostitute there. She didn't agree at first, but after she was beaten, she finally agreed to be a prostitute.

The above excerpts indicate that my respondents understood trafficking on a continuum. They differentiated between "prostitution" and "sex trafficking." For example, Yulia indicated she was alarmed because the girls did not have documents when they came to her for a medical examination. The withholding of documents is a common tool in trafficking; without identification documents, the victims of trafficking are more dependent on their traffickers.

Macro-level Causes of Trafficking

Respondents made several connections between trafficking and macro-level (i.e., structural) issues. Five broad categories emerged as macro-level issues discussed by respondents. These include (1) poverty and unemployment, (2) corruption, (3) globalization, (4) patriarchy, and (5) Middle Eastern/Islamic culture. These correspond to the push, pull and restrictive immigration causes of trafficking reviewed in the literature review section.

Push factors. Almost every respondent pointed out poverty's role in creating the problem of trafficking. Because poverty and unemployment increased after the collapse of the USSR, people were pushed to find work outside of Moldova and even the region. Andrei (32), an electrical mechanist from Moldovka, indicated that trafficking is simply a reality of developing countries. However, this did not necessarily excuse people who are trafficked from blame. Alice (32), a student from Chisinau, explained that the entire country is poor during transition, not just some segments of the population, so "everyone here can find the possibility not to choose this way."

Nostalgia for their socialist past was an underlying theme throughout the interviews, but a corresponding acceptance of change was a frequent addendum to participant responses. Konstantin (33), referred to the superior education system that collapsed along with the Soviet regime. However, he indicated that the tensions between the West and East during the Cold War era piqued people's interests, which led them to migrate after the collapse of the Eastern bloc. The following highlights the multifaceted responses I received that were related to push factors:

So I think the Soviet times was the best times for young people, for their outlooks and of course the education was on a higher level than presently, and this collapse of the political, social and economic systems led to this gap in education... Due to capitalism, there are a lot of people from all the republics of the former USSR who went abroad, and they had been educated during the Soviet time about the savage greed of capitalism and this principle of "dog eat dog." The Soviet system protected its people in general. On the other hand, the same system kept their borders closed.

The superior education, yet worldly naivety that Konstantin alluded to was reflected in other responses. For example, Nina, a 45 year old aerobics instructor from Chisinau, said, "During the 70 years of Soviet times, everybody was brought up in the meaning that everybody is your friend and brother and there are more good people than bad people." She went on to clarify that this was more salient in the countryside than in the urban area, where people have always been more cynical. Thus, part of her attribution to trafficking was a Soviet era education that was more internalized by rural people. Valentina (61), a university professor from Chisinau, believed that trafficking specifically affected the countryside because after the Soviet collapse the kolkhoz (collective farming) system disintegrated, causing widespread unemployment.

Pull factors. Patriarchy and Middle East/Islamic culture were noted by some participants as the demand forces driving trafficking. Mary's (54) narrative indicated an era of patriarchy that has become more "ferocious" and oppressive to women. She hoped that the cruelty that has been building under patriarchy might bring about a new era of matriarchy. But interestingly, in the later part of her narrative, she revealed an internalized negative view of women as being naïve and too trusting. While Mary noted that the naivety of women is partly to blame, Oleg (64), believed that men are to blame because they have become traffickers: "In a patriarchic system, men should be strong, be wealthy and now that times have changed, they are very vulnerable, and that is why, I think, that their moral degradation is deeper than women."

Closely related to patriarchy is the pull factor of Islam and the Middle East. A majority of the respondents believed that people, mostly women, who are trafficked from the former Soviet Union are sent to

Middle Eastern countries. As Nina (45) explained, it is simply unsafe to travel to Muslim countries, unlike Western countries. Konstantin (33) also indicated how channels get established from Moldova to Middle Eastern countries. He suggested that because a lot of students from the Middle East go to school in Moldova, they are able to set up agencies locally that lure young women with the false promise of a legal job abroad, and subsequently coordinate their transportation to Arabic countries. Valentina (61) tied together the issue of Middle East/Islamic culture and patriarchy:

I suppose, I'm sure that most of the women trafficked get to Muslim and Asiatic countries where there is a ban on sexual pleasures, so these women will be in sexual slavery just for Asiatic and Muslim men just because they treat their own women differently, of course.

Few people believed that the U.S., for example, was a receiving country for trafficking victims. The Polaris Project (2004) reported that there are an estimated 17,500 victims trafficked into the U.S. every year. There appears to be some "scapegoating" when a region is focused on more than others in a global phenomenon. Again, there is probably truth to the respondents' allegations, but it also reveals some other issues at work, such as a negative association with Islam.

Immigration Policy. Based on participants' responses, they understood immigration policy in terms of "globalization." One particular aspect of globalization that fits under the theme of immigration policy includes perceptions of the functioning of borders. Unlike the institutional view, which indicates that restrictive immigration policies exacerbate trafficking, a majority of the participants believed that borders did not have an effect on international trafficking. This seemed odd until several respondents indicated pointed to the role of corruption in border crossing. Ivan (20), an electrician from Chisinau who was previously a customs official, explained that the level of openness at the border was irrelevant because "guides," who were mostly Romanians, would smuggle people across the Moldovan/Romanian border for profit. While it seems logical that the borders become less important if one is moving people illegally across them anyway, I side with the few respondents who suggested that the borders are too closed because, as Katarina (54) so clearly articulated, "I think borders are too closed, and this is the main obstacle to a free choice of job. The people are forced to apply for help to traffickers."

Most respondents mentioned corruption in passing, as if it were a part of everyday life in the former Soviet period. However, some emphasized the importance of corruption in trafficking and other social problems. For example, Konstantin (33), a doctor from Chisinau, stopped the interview several times to emphasize the problem of corruption in Moldova. He said,

I want (the researcher) to understand something. Our state is very corrupt. I am absolutely sure that the officials

in very high levels are involved in trafficking, too. It is the business of high ranking officials. Especially through their children, they are involved in business. I must repeat that our country is greatly corrupted. It seems to me that the laws are for poor people, middle class people, but not for rich people, about 10% of the population, the laws are not for them. I am a great patriot, but it hurts me badly that I can do nothing to change the current situation, namely the political situation.

Katarina (54), a university professor from Chisinau, also indicated that because of the prevalence of corruption in Moldova, officials may be involved in trafficking. Ludmila (32), an engineer from Chisinau, suggested that because traffickers had strong ties to authorities, reporting instances of trafficking would be meaningless, and she described the traffickers as "unscrupulous, maybe with a lot of links with police...." Alisa (25), a clothing industry engineer from Chisinau, thought that corruption could "get anything through borders." In a sense, Alisa was challenging the idea of restrictive immigration as a cause of trafficking. She believed the open or closed state of borders had no impact on trafficking.

Conversely, several respondents indicated a belief that the borders were now too open. They noted that if borders are more closed, people cannot be trafficked because people are not regularly allowed to leave. Irina (54) claimed, "(During the totalitarian regimes, the country is shut from all other countries, and people have no possibility to get away." In her mind, this is what prevented trafficking from occurring during the Soviet era. Interestingly, when I asked respondents if they believed people were trafficked to the U.S., most thought it was rare. There were several responses that indicated they believed that the U.S. was above corruption. Mary (54), who was critical of what was happening in her country, believed that trafficking was not a pressing issue in the U.S. "I can assume that Americans are more civilized than to use such live meat." However, she later stated, "I think that all this situation is due to very cruel films, very nasty films, filthy films, that have already left America and Western Europe and came to this country to bring out the worst qualities in humans." In other words, the West has exported their exploitative films and culture to which they have evolved past. She indicated that this has been exported to "young people in the former Soviet Union (who) are very cruel and are obsessed with only money and sex which are instilled by films."

Implications and Conclusion

In this article, I juxtaposed what the public and institutions have to "say" about trafficking. Combining community and institutional knowledge and perceptions of a complex social problem, such as trafficking, helps develop a better understanding of the phenome-

non. Several of the respondents had been exposed to the mechanisms of trafficking and had knowledge about victimization processes. Even though respondents tended to individualize the problem, they also demonstrated a complex understanding of the structural or macro-level causes of trafficking. Because of their intimate, on-the-ground knowledge of trafficking, they were able to contextualize the problem and explain how these macro-level causes play out in a day to day basis.

If the macro-level causes of trafficking are organized into the categories of push factors, pull factors, and immigration policy, it is possible to compare community and institutional knowledge. According to institutions, pull factors include the easing of emigration processes, international economic disparities, and poverty. The pull factors include the demand for cheap labor and sex work. When it comes to immigration policy, many institutions believe that the difficult migration processes exacerbate the problem of trafficking. According to the public, push factors include poverty and corruption. Pull factors include the Middle East/Islam and patriarchy. For immigration policy, community knowledge differed greatly from institutional knowledge. The majority of the respondents believed that the state of borders (how open or closed they were) did not really matter. However, some respondents believed that the open state of borders has become a problem since the collapse of the USSR.

This combined knowledge can help guide policy decisions. For example, if institutions advocate for immigration reform, it may not matter what reforms are made officially if the implementing agency and personnel are corrupt. Also, this combined knowledge indicates that decriminalizing the prostitute and only criminalizing the solicitor of prostitution may be the best approach to changing laws on prostitution.

It is also important to consider what impact the interrelation of perceptions and policies might have on the victims of human trafficking. While respondents did show an understanding of structural causes of trafficking, "victim blaming" did emerge during the interviews. However, that was tempered by the respondents' understanding of macro-level causes of trafficking. Combining institutional and public perceptions and knowledge of a social problem is helpful not only in establishing a more thorough understanding of the social problem and guiding policy decisions, but in exploring what experiences victims may face at the community level.

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APPENDIX A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Demographic information:

Gender _____
 Date of Birth _____
 Highest level of education completed _____
 Ethnicity (Moldovan, Russian, Jewish, Romanian, Ukrainian, Tatar, etc.) _____
 Current occupation _____

Please answer the following questions according to your OPINION. There are no right or wrong answers. These questions refer to trafficking in humans only.

1. Are you familiar with the issue of trafficking?

Please explain what you know about it?

(Probe: How is someone trafficked? Why are they trafficked? What happens to a person who is trafficked? Where are people trafficked from and to?)

2. What do you think about the issue of trafficking?

Why does it occur in this country? How many people do you think are trafficked out of Moldova every year? Are they women or men/age? What are they trafficked for?

Are there any other countries in which this occurs?

Should anything be done about the issue? If so, what?

3. What do you think about people who are trafficked?

4. Do you think a person who is trafficked knows what she/he is getting into?

Does a person get into this situation voluntarily?

(Probe: Is any part of the process voluntary for the person being trafficked? If so, which part?)

5. Please describe a person who is trafficked. What kind of a person is trafficked? (Please remember that I do not want any specific names or identification if you know someone specifically. I would just like to know what your idea is of a person who is trafficked).

6. Do you think you are like this person in any way?

Why or why not.

7. Do you think you could ever be trafficked?

- 7a. Do you think trafficking is the result of globalization? Why or why not?

Are people trafficked because borders are too open or too closed, or do you think the state of borders has anything to do with this issue?

8. Do you think the government of Moldova has a responsibility to spend money on anti-trafficking? Do you think citizens of this country have a responsibility to report instances of trafficking?

9. What kinds of people do you think are traffickers?

Are they citizens of this country? Rich/poor, male/female, age? Do you think individuals, organizations or corporations are involved in trafficking?

Please describe a typical trafficker to me? (Please remember that I do not want any specific names or identification if you know someone specifically. I would just like to know what your idea is of a trafficker).