Reflections of a Team Member on a Study of Commercial Sex and Sex Trafficking
An Organizational Psychology Perspective

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May 2025

From August 2021 until January 2024, I worked on a research team which coded interviews of 47 people with experience in commercial sex, 36 of whom met the criteria for having been sex trafficked as per the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA).[1]

I was motivated to do this work because I was interested in learning more about sex trafficking, the psychological effects it can have on its victims and their loved ones, and how people heal from the psychological damage it can cause. My interest was born of having recently learned that someone important in my life had been commercially sexually exploited as a child.

I didn't know when I joined the team that the team's work would intersect with another interest of mine, organizational psychology, especially the work of Edgar Schein (1980, 1987, 1999, 2010) and Edwin Nevis (1987), and what Nevis calls the gestalt approach to organizational consulting. I had learned this approach to consulting – more generally an approach to understanding human social systems and how to intervene in them – from Schein when I was a graduate student at MIT in the 1980s, and it strongly influenced my subsequent careers in institutional investment consulting, university teaching, and now, psychological research on commercial sex.

As my participation on the research team unfolded, I increasingly saw the team's dynamics through the lens of the gestalt model I had learned from Nevis and Schein. I also came to see the team's success as closely linked to its alignment with this model. In this paper I will describe some elements of the gestalt model and how these elements helped me understand the team and its work. I begin in Section I by describing the project and the teams that worked on it. Section II describes some elements of the gestalt model which seemed to align with what I saw in the team. Section III discusses a question the gestalt model raises for the research methodology employed by the team. Section IV shares concluding thoughts.

[1] The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), enacted in 2000, defines sex trafficking as human trafficking done for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Human trafficking is defined as the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, or receiving individuals through force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation. In the case of victims under 18, any such acts are considered human trafficking even if no force, fraud, or coercion is involved.

I. The Research Project, The Research Team, and the Coding Team

The purposes of the research project as stated in the project's IRB[2] application were to:

- Study the relationship between attachment style and "cycling", which is when trafficking victims who have escaped their trafficker seemingly voluntarily return to the trafficker, sometimes in a pattern which repeats itself.
- Generate findings to make recommendations that can shape and improve psychosocial health interventions for this population.

To pursue these goals the research team recruited 55 subjects[3] with experience in commercial sex and tried to learn as much from them as could be accomplished in a half-day with each subject. This was done by conducting two interviews with each subject, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), a structured interview focused on early life experiences and designed to elicit an attachment profile[4], and an open-ended semi-structured Life Experience Interview focused on the participant's life during and after their experience with commercial sex. Each subject also provided demographic data and took several psychological tests.

I use the term "research team" to refer the entire group of 19 people[5] who worked on this project and are listed as co-authors on the first research paper the group produced (Contreras, et al (2025)). The "coding team", of which I was a part, and which is the subject of this essay, was a subset of the research team and was convened in August 2021[6], after the research team had already spent approximately four years completing the following components of the project:

- *Study Design*. The design of the study was the outcome of collaboration with RIA, an agency providing services to survivors of commercial sex and sex trafficking.
- *IRB Approval.* All research on human subjects in the United States must be done under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Getting approval from the IRB to undertake the research required developing detailed plans for the research and negotiating modifications to those plans with the IRB.
- *Recruiting Participants.* Participants were recruited wherever they could be found, primarily through word-of-mouth and fliers. RIA played a key role in recruiting participants.

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[2] An Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a body at a research institution which reviews proposals for research on human subjects and has the authority to approve or reject such proposals. The purpose of an IRB is to prevent research on human subjects from harming the subjects.

[3] Eight participants were eliminated prior to coding, so the team coded 47 interviews. 2 participants were eliminated after coding, for 45 research subjects in the final analysis.

[4] An attachment profile of an individual is a description of that person's internal working model of how to relate to other people and how to respond to adversity.

[5] The team also employed two AAI coders who are not listed as coauthors. These coders were not a part of the project except for the very specific role they performed. They did not interact with the rest of the research team, except for the PI.

[6] The coding team was to be convened in early 2020, with the meetings being held in person, but the convening was delayed by the covid-19 pandemic. When the team finally convened in August 2021, the meetings were held mostly on Zoom.

- *Data Gathering.* Each participant spent a half day with a team of two researchers. All data gathered from a given participant was gathered in this one session. The data included two interviews, demographic information, and psychological tests.
- *Transcribing and Scoring.* With each participant being interviewed twice, 110 interviews needed transcribing. The Life Experiences Interviews were coded by the coding team; the Adult Attachment Interviews were coded by outside contractors.
- *Developing systems for managing and working with the data*. This project generated an enormous amount of data, data that sometimes needed to be accessed in real time during coding meetings. This required investment in systems and organization.

The coding team

The coding team[7] had a slightly different composition than the original research team that completed the above tasks. Some members of the original team dropped off, and the coding team received several new members who had not participated in the original research. I was a member of this latter group.

Total membership on the coding team was about 12, with about half of these being "core" members who showed up to most team meetings and were engaged in the coding process in a sustained manner until it was done.

The coding team was diverse in many ways (race, age, gender[8], lived experience) but also showed cohesion in that most members had a deep connection to and passion for the issues the team was studying, and shared a culture of respect for our subjects and for each other. The team included clinicians, students, faculty, alumni, and survivors.

The task of the coding team was to code 47 Life Experience Interviews using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology (Hill (2012), Hill and Knox (2021)). CQR calls for coding to be done in groups, with all decisions made consensually. CQR is described more thoroughly in section III below.

How the coding team worked

The coding team met multiple times per week for over two years. The bulk of our work consisted of reading transcripts out loud together, discussing the content, and classifying passages as to topic and message. After this was done, "cross analysis" grouped the data by category and extracted themes.

At the beginning of the coding process, we had no categories. All we had was 47 transcripts from the Life Experiences in CS interviews.[9] These transcripts had already been provisionally broken into sections of a few sentences each. We read each of these passages

[7] The coding team is also described in Reed (2023).

[8] When the coding team was convened in 2021, I was the only male on the team, and this remained true for several months. We were eventually joined by a second male.

[9] This was not literally true. We also had audio recordings of the interviews and access to all the other data that was gathered. Still, it was effectively true, as we only turned to these other resources when needed. Most of the time we worked only with transcripts.

out loud, taking turns, and classifying each passage as to general topic as well as specific content. We made up the categories as we went and modified them as needed.

The process by nature generated a lot of discussion. Because the process was consensual, we often had discussions about how to classify a given passage, or whether to create a new category, or to combine two or more categories. These discussions were an essential part of the CQR methodology, and also served a generative role in the group in that they helped us get to know each other, feel comfortable with each other, develop a group culture, and knit together our shared understanding of reality.

The principal investigator (PI) of the project was the clear leader of the coding team, though in a light-handed way. She embraced and nurtured the leadership impulses of other team members and seemed to be operating from a set of principles which set the tone for a collaborative, nurturing, and productive team culture.

II. The Gestalt Model and Its Application to Coding Team Dynamics: Three Principles

In this section I discuss three principles of the Gestalt Model[10] which seemed to have been embraced by the coding team:

1. The true data of experience are organized wholes.
2. Evocative leadership is preferred, but provocative leadership is sometimes necessary.
3. Be in the moment and make the most of it.

Gestalt Principle #1: The True Data of Experience Are Organized Wholes

> *"Gestalt psychology … is predicated on the belief that complex human behavior cannot be explained as an additive building up of simple components. According to the Gestalt Psychologists … the true data of experience are organized wholes." (Nevis, 1987, p.4.)*

This "principle of the organized whole" helped me interpret much of what occurred in the coding group. I will illustrate using the example of project goals.

A Gestalt perspective on project goals

The project goals as stated in the IRB application, while accurate, do not fully capture the layered, intertwined sense of purpose which emerged within the coding team. Without explicitly articulating all its goals, the team behaved as if the following goals were important both as supportive goals to the explicit research goals, and as worthwhile goals in their own right:

Implicit goal #1: *Honor the wisdom of our subjects*. One of the most striking things about working on the coding team was the passion, love, and sense of positive personal transformation that exuded from some of our subjects. We felt blessed that these (mostly)

[10] A full description of the Gestalt Model of organizational consulting is contained in Nevis (1987). The approach is also imbedded many of Schein's books; see Schein (1980, 1987, 1999, 2010), for example.

women opened their hearts and souls to us. An implicit, more nuanced sense of purpose seemed to emerge from our learning about these subjects' experiences and from our group discussions of those experiences, and that was to listen carefully to the wisdom of the participants and give voice to the truths they shared with us. Many of the participants shared with us hard-earned and authentic wisdom they have gleaned from their experience. As the research team learned these stories, it seemed to me that a deep respect for our subjects developed among coding team members, and that this respect called the team to embrace the ethos of honoring the stories, wisdom, and desire to be heard of our research subjects.

Implicit goal #2: Create an environment in which the growth path of each researcher is channeled and nurtured. All the members of the research team were on a professional development path related to research on the psychology of commercial sex and sex trafficking. The group seemed to foster growth in members along several professional dimensions, including learning qualitative research, content knowledge, and clinical material, as well as developing relationships with professional colleagues.

In addition, some team members had a personal history of having been trafficked, or had been impacted by trafficking in other ways, and were on a healing path. While the team was not a therapy group, the culture of the team allowed those who were healing to engage in a way that supported their therapeutic progress. It seemed that people who were in stages 2, 3, and 4 of Herman's trauma recovery model could all potentially have found this group as something that enabled their moving through the recovery process.[11]

The group also seemed to embody Schein's (1980, p154) observation that "An organization built on self-actualizing assumptions is more likely to create a climate conducive to the emergence of psychologically meaningful groups."

Implicit goal #3: Build a research community. In addition to providing a context for team members to build community with each other, the coding team also provided an opportunity for community to be built among larger networks that include allied organizations and individuals. Further, the example provided by the coding team can be a model for future coding teams, and thereby further develop the networks that enable vibrant community.

These three implicit goals all supported the IRB-stated goals and were also worthwhile in their own right. The coding team working on all these goals simultaneously is consistent with the gestalt perspective which suggests that, when goals are intertwined into an organized whole like this, it is best to deal with them as an organized whole. In other words, the easiest way to pursue any of the goals is to pursue all the goals. All the goals, in the end, support one another.

[11] Herman (1992) posited three stages of trauma recovery: establishing safety, making meaning, and connecting with a wider community. Herman (2022) introduced a potential fourth stage: justice.

Gestalt principle #2: Evocative Leadership Is Preferred, but Provocative Leadership Is Sometimes Necessary[12]

Some situations call for groups to be led in a command-and-control manner. Others call for a support-and-nurture approach. Some call for balancing of the two approaches. And some leaders feel more drawn to one approach or the other. The project's PI took a balanced approach in leading the coding team but seemed to have an affinity for the support-and-nurture approach. She let the group operate on a support and nurture basis as much as possible, but also recognized the need to be directive at times. Her investment into the support and nurture approach gave her the credibility with the group to effectively lead more assertively when the situation called for that.

Nevis's notions of provocative and evocative modes of influence are similar to what I have called command-and-control and support-and-nurture approaches. He defines the provocative mode of influence as the leader attempting to force a specific action in the group, whereas in the evocative mode of influence the leader strives to get the group interested in its own functioning and in doing so brings about a shift in what is attended to by the group, a shift that emerges from the group. (Nevis, 1987, p126-127)

Nevis (1987, p 128) attributes the following behaviors to the **evocative** mode of influence:

- "Behavior that brings forth something in the client, but the response is client-directed and often not predicable by the consultant."
- "Behavior creating conditions – such as trust, hope, safety, vision – that allows excitement or interest to grow in others."
- "Actions that 'break up' the client's awareness but still leave room for the client to choose its own actions"

And he attributes the following behaviors to the **provocative** mode of influence:

- "An active, directed intervention; planned or sharply focused behavior designed to force the client to tend to something specific."
- "Actions that break up or violate understanding, expectations, or contracts between or among people."
- "Actions that force or require the client to change its actions."

Nevis (1987, p131) cites Buddha, utopian communities, client-centered counseling, awareness-enhancing techniques, and apprentice learning arrangements as examples of the evocative mode. He cites evangelical preaching, boycotts, coercive persuasion, encounter groups, and the Tavistock Group as examples of the provocative mode. Interestingly, MLK and Ghandi appear as examples of both the evocative and the provocative modes.

The leadership style of our PI emphasized the evocative. She gave the group plenty of space to discover itself. She displayed an open attitude toward the impulses of coding team members in our coding meetings. She was open to our suggestions and open to the

[12] I have never heard this principle stated this way. It reflects my attempt to distill things I have learned from Schein and Nevis into a simple principle.

conversation wondering a little off topic if it was still related to our work. She generally did not allow much time for totally unrelated small talk, but occasionally she did. She seemed to sense when the team needed it.

Some rich conversations emerged out of our coding process, generative conversations, one might say. It wasn't predictable when a given passage would launch a generative conversation and this created a benefit to flexibility about timetables. These generative conversations were so important to the research process and for other reasons that it was critical for the group to have an attitude of openness towards in-the-moment experiences in which time is suspended and generative processes are allowed to emerge.

This flexibility – this ability to see when the evocative is appropriate and when a provocative approach is needed, and the ability to switch into either mode smoothly – is a key element of leadership which our PI displayed. The situation primarily called for a support-and-nurture approach due in part to the sensitive nature of the content and the related need for psychological safety. Yet, there always came a time when we just needed to get the work done.

Gestalt principle #3: Be in the Moment and Make the Most of It

Schein (1980, p183), when discussing experiential training methods developed in and around the National Training Laboratories, says these methods assume that "People can learn best from an analysis of their own immediate, here-and-now psychological experiences."

<u>An example of experiential training</u>
In the fall of 1987, I had the great fortune to be a participant in a course taught by Schein which used experiential training methods. The course was called Doctoral Seminar in Research Methods and was intended for doctoral students in organization studies. There were 9 such students in the class, each of whom was concurrently engaged in field work with organizations for their thesis research. I was an anomaly in the group, in that I was a doctoral student in economics.

Each session started with one student interviewing another student about their research. Over the course of the semester, each student experienced being both interviewer and interviewee. The interviews were videotaped. After each interview we watched the videotape with the understanding that anyone could stop the tape at any time to discuss what was going on in the interview, or to discuss any issue which was prompted by watching the tape.

Watching the tapes together prompted many interesting discussions in the group. Most of these discussions were free ranging with little overt facilitation. Occasionally, though, Ed would interject, sometimes by just asking an evocative question, and sometimes being more directive. For example, he would sometimes interject by saying "this seems like a good time for some theory," and would then proceed to explain some aspect of social psychological

theory which would provide insight into the issue being discussed, the behavior of the group, or both.

It became clear over time that Ed had a body of theory – some psychology, some anthropology, some group dynamics, some change management, all integrated into a more general theory of human social systems – that he wished to transmit to us. The interviews and discussions played the role of a "teachable moment generating process". This process would generate many teachable moments but not in a predictable manner. Ed seemed to be looking for opportunities to make certain points, and to cover certain material by the time the course was over. The collection of this material can be thought of as a picture (an integrated whole), and each teachable moment as an opportunity to fill in some small part of the picture. Over time more and more of the picture got filled in until eventually enough was filled in that the students could "complete" the picture on their own.

I describe Ed's class in detail because something very similar happened in the coding team. We weren't technically a course, but we could have been. It seemed as though our PI had a body of knowledge she wished to transmit to us and that she used the process of reading and coding the interviews together as a "teachable moment generating process" and then used those moments to fill in the landscape of the knowledge she wished to impart to us.

Thus, effective leadership of the coding team not only involved being in the moment – i.e., seeing what the moment you are in has to offer and weighing the importance of that vs. sticking to a plan – but also having an activity or process which generated teachable moments. Thus, we might think of a gestalt-oriented, moment-focused group process as having three elements: a process for creating teachable moments, an ability to recognize these moments when they present themselves, and an ability to take advantage of them.

When a teachable moment occurs, or more generally, when an exploitable situation which may last longer than a moment occurs, a gestalt-oriented leader will seize those moments and situations or will allow the team to spontaneously take advantage of them in an emergent way. On the coding team we encountered many such moments and situations. Most notably, the fact that our research subjects were so awesome about telling us their life stories and their reflections on making sense of their stories gave us a chance to go deeper into the wisdom these subjects wished to share, and this was allowed to shape the unfolding group development in a very positive way.

III. Reflections on CQR and the Gestalt Perspective

Qualitative social science research employs many methods, including interviews, direct observation, ethnography, and clinical research. These methods can be employed by a single decision maker and can also be employed by a team of researchers which makes all key decisions consensually. Consensual decision making in research is particularly relevant when the topic of the study is nuanced, ambiguous, and seen differently from different perspectives. In such a setting a consensus process allows not only for a fuller picture of the situation to emerge from multiple views, but for those views to be vetted and honed through

discussion with team members who have different views. This allows for a fuller understanding of the data and reduces the likelihood of researcher bias.

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) as articulated by Hill (2012) and Hill and Knox (2021) is an approach to incorporating consensus decision processes into qualitative research. The approach, according to Hill and Knox (2021), involves the following elements:

1. The research is inductive rather than deductive. That is, the hypotheses arise out of the data rather than the data being gathered to test preformed hypotheses. (p81)
2. The data is gathered through naturalistic, interactive methods. That is, CQR researchers explore phenomena as they naturally occur. (p5)
3. Data analysis is performed consensually. (p5, p81)

Of course, the first 2 of these elements can be employed without the third. Similarly, the third element can be employed in research settings that do not embrace the first 2 elements.

Our research was consensual in two ways. First, the Life Experiences Interviews were designed, conducted, coded, and thematically summarized following the principles of CQR as laid out in Hill (2012) and Hill and Knox (2021). Second, the practice of the coding team working in a group and the philosophy of consensual decision making came to be central to the coding team culture, and that culture was infused throughout the research project, even those parts that were not, technically, CQR.

<u>The Gestalt Perspective and CQR</u>

The CQR approach as articulated in Hill (2012) recognizes the importance of the gestalt principle of "organized wholes" as evidenced by the following quote:

> "*To understand an individual sentence that the participant has uttered, the researchers need to be immersed in everything the person has said (which they do through reading or listening to the whole case go get a sense of context before making judgements.*)". (Hill, 2012, p. 9)

As a practical matter, when the coding team transitioned from coding individual interviews to extracting themes across interviews, we lost some of wholeness of each participant's story, I believe. It seemed that there was tension introduced by the CQR method – or perhaps our implementation of it – that made it difficult to aggregate stories into themes without fragmenting the individual narratives. Because of this, I think there is much still to be learned by revisiting the data with an eye towards building, for each participant, a "whole narrative" which incorporates all data about that participant. Themes could then be extracted again and compared to those we have already developed.

In addition, I believe it would be worthwhile to be in dialogue with other consensual qualitative researchers about this tension between the wholeness of individual narratives and the risk of fragmenting those narratives when the narratives are broken into small parts so

that they can be compared to the small parts of other participants' narratives. Have other researchers encountered this tension? If so, how have they addressed it?

IV. Concluding Thoughts

1. I am struck by the number of touchpoints between this work and that of Schein. Of course, whenever one works in groups there will be touchpoints with Schein. But this project had many such touchpoints, including using a collaborative process to design the project, treating the subjects and researchers as whole people, the importance of psychological safety in both the interviews and the research team, and the evocative leadership style of our PI. Further, the research content – a large element of which could be thought of as coercive persuasion – tracked Schein's work (1956, 1961) on coercive persuasion in Chinese prisoner of war camps and civilian reeducation camps during the Korean War. And the role of relationships in recovery from trafficking is anticipated by Schein's work (1965) on personal change through interpersonal relationships.

2. We put our research methods to the test and found areas where they can be improved. Notably, we identified a tension between treating subjects as whole persons and the need to disassemble subjects' narratives for the purpose of categorizing, aggregating, and comparing our subjects. We don't think this tension is a necessary by-product of CQR, and we look forward to ironing the kinks out in future projects.

3. For all the work we did on this project, we are still at the beginning of learning all we can from our subjects. We have identified numerous additional analyses and themes to pursue with the data we already have. We also have plans for new projects which will involve new data gathering. The translation of our results into training materials for therapists desiring to improve their knowledge and skill in this area also lies ahead of us.

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