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Building core skills among adult survivors of human trafficking in a workplace setting in the Philippines

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Abstract
This article presents the experiences of practitioners supporting survivors of human trafficking in developing core skills in a workplace setting in the Philippines. Safe and supportive workplace environments that use evidence-informed strategies to strengthen core skills can contribute to the healthy reintegration of human trafficking survivors.

Keywords
Human trafficking, impact sourcing, Philippines, reintegration, social enterprise, workforce development

Human trafficking survivors often face considerable difficulty securing safe, sustainable employment upon exiting human trafficking and returning to the community. Without safe employment that pays a living wage, people who have been trafficked remain highly vulnerable to ongoing abuse and exploitation. This article presents the experiences of practitioners supporting trafficking survivors in developing core skills in a workplace setting in the Philippines. Findings are taken from a case study of a social enterprise that has been operating for almost 5 years in the Philippines (Company A).[1] The company provides computer-based training followed by long-term employment for successful graduates, for survivors of human trafficking and other vulnerable populations, including survivors of labor exploitation, sexual abuse, and intimate partner violence.[2] The company currently employs 58 survivors and 29 people from vulnerable backgrounds. The majority of

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survivors previously lived in residential shelters. Survivors have received varying forms of service from a range of partner agencies, including life skills development, legal support, career counseling, art therapy, and educational scholarships. The company aims not only to provide a living wage through enhanced technical skills and stable employment, but also a context in which survivors can progress toward achieving full and sustained reintegration. While the acquisition of computer literacy and other technical skills is relatively straightforward for most trainees, the process of reintegration appears less linear and easily defined. However, it has become clear that successful reintegration requires significant attention and effort to be placed on helping survivors acquire strong core skills (Gill, 2017). Without these core skills, the acquisition of technical skills for employment will not have a transforming impact.

Core skills refer to a broad range of capabilities required for success not only in the workplace, but in all aspects of life, including school, home, family, finances, and health (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2015). Examples of core skills include planning and organization, problem-solving, focus, teamwork, and interpersonal communication. Core skills are required at school, work, and home; in caring for children, for study and for career; and for managing health needs and finances (Heckman and Rubinstein, 2001; UNICEF, 2012). Given the multiple layers of vulnerability and trauma experienced by trafficked persons, support in developing core skills is often needed to help survivors succeed in competitive workplace settings. While the determinants of trafficking are complex, many survivors come from backgrounds where, in addition to the effects of poverty, they have experienced physical or sexual abuse, unhealthy family environments, and/or a lack of support systems (Jobe, 2010; Zimmerman and Pocock, 2013). In addition, victims can experience significant trauma through the experience of trafficking, including physical, psychological, and sexual violence, restriction of movement, poor working and living conditions, and excessive working hours (Kiss et al., 2015; Oram et al., 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2011). These experiences lead to long-term physical and mental health issues, including a high prevalence of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and other anxiety disorders (Hossain et al., 2010; Kiss et al., 2015; Tsutsumi et al., 2008). Trauma further compromises core skills development by negatively impacting key parts of the brain, including the prefrontal cortex and limbic system required for executive function (Babcock, 2014). Each of these experiences can impede the healthy development of core skills.

Approach to core skills development

Research pertaining to core skills development is lacking within the literature on trafficking-specific services. Much of the research that does exist regarding core skills is from community-based youth programs and/or more developed social services systems (Brewer, 2013; ILO, 2015). Company A has needed to significantly adapt existing resources and innovate new approaches (outlined below).

Workplace environment and culture

Company A is intentional about creating a calm, supportive, and predictable work environment with clearly articulated expectations about performance and behavior. Consistent with a trauma-informed approach, it is recognized that high-stress workplaces can cue the threat-response system, hijacking areas of the brain needed for focus and decision-making (Babcock, 2014). A supportive and respectful environment can help overcome the toxic stress of poverty and trauma, providing an environment for 'more well-considered responses' together with a 'sense of control, hope, and self-efficacy' through which core skills can grow (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016: 8). Even when not employing people who have experienced trauma, research shows that supportive, tolerant, and respectful workplaces are critical for well-developed employability

skills (Smith and Comyn, 2003). Similarly, companies where employees feel psychologically safe and experience good communication produce better functioning and more effective teams (Edmondson, 1999).

In Company A, company values are openly and frequently discussed, as well as being purposefully modeled by management. This process of organizational socialization is similar to Social Learning Theory, where environmental factors including reinforcement, observational learning, and perceived norms help survivors implement professional attitudes and behaviors (Bandura, 1997). This environment appears to help survivors begin to view themselves as skilled professionals. Research with survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation has found that a key to successful reintegration is reconstruction of the identity away from being a sexual object (Dahal et al., 2015). Participating in a healthy working environment after being trafficked 'reclaims the experience of work and turns it into an experience of self-sufficiency and accomplishment' for survivors (Brennan, 2014: 164). It is Company A's experience that internalizing a professional identity plays an important role in restoring dignity and self-esteem for the survivor. Research among trauma survivors has demonstrated that peer support, a sense of belonging, and breaking away from an identity as a trauma victim can improve mental health outcomes (Katona et al., 2015). Internalizing a professional identity and absorbing professional values appear to impart dignity and encourage survivors to adopt skillsets that transfer outside the workplace. Company A observes that these factors can influence how survivors manage other aspects of their lives, including their health needs, finances, and family relationships. For example, health crises and illness-related absenteeism are common during the first 12 months of employment. However, identifying as working professionals and shifting their aspirations accordingly appears to help survivors more effectively manage their health.

As an outsourcing company, projects at Company A involve engagement with external clients. However, direct customer service interactions can be particularly stressful (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). This is particularly true if employees are involved in international projects and have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse by expatriate men in the Philippines. To ensure employees feel safe and calm, any interactions with clients are buffered by workplace supervisors.

Performance management

As with most companies, Company A has clearly documented performance indicators and employees undergo quarterly performance appraisals. These are standardized and transparent, with incentives for good performance, and clearly documented consequences for inadequate performance or inappropriate behaviors. After receiving feedback, employees develop a performance plan with a clearly outlined pathway to improvement. Because trafficking survivors often continue to struggle with shame and low self-worth, performance issues and disciplinary measures are undertaken in a manner that will not increase these feelings or re-traumatize employees (Hom and Woods, 2013; Yea, 2005). However, employees often require more regular feedback, and bi-weekly feedback is given to highlight successes and opportunities. People with a trauma history may easily misinterpret interactions as being negative or threatening, which then undermines a sense of competency and increases negative feelings (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). Regular feedback together with incentives and clear, consistent measurement can help to break this cycle (Babcock, 2014).

Employees who struggle to meet workplace performance expectations with enhanced performance management are referred to a workplace counselor, who is available to any employee requesting additional support. As is true in many development settings, access to trained mental health professionals is limited in the Philippines. Hence Company A is partnering with external organizations to develop a more rigorous approach to counseling which is being tailored to this unique context.

Formal core skills training

Employees participate in formal core skills training, which is undertaken in parallel with technical skills training, initially daily during the 2-month induction training and twice or thrice weekly after the trainees are progressively integrated into regular workplace operations. The formalized curricula have been developed in partnership with consultants from public health and development backgrounds, who provide training for facilitators together with ongoing program monitoring and evaluation. Core skill trainers work in tandem with technical supervisors to help employees transfer and use these skills on the work floor. The program uses interactive teaching methodologies, including journaling, games, and role-playing. There is a strong focus on helping employees to identify their life goals, core values, and motivators, and enabling them to understand how successful employment at Company A aligns with these. Self-reflective activities, such as journaling, are particularly important to help employees develop a deeper commitment to their goals and monitor their own progress toward achieving them. The curriculum presents a range of evidence-informed strategies to help in achieving both personal and work-related goals, with tools to track progress (McGonigal, 2012). The approach draws on insights from cognitive-behavioral therapies, wherein participants learn to identify self-sabotaging thinking and behavior and attempt to replace this with more helpful patterns (Cracium, 2012). Modules covered include professionalism, learning, problem-solving, planning, communication, self-control, and teamwork.

A financial capability and savings program called BARUG[3] is provided by a partner, the Eleison Foundation. The 1-year program involves three parts: matched savings, a financial literacy skills-building course, and support sessions (Sherraden, 1991). Survivors can avail themselves of a savings-deposit collection service provided by the program and their savings are matched at a 1:1 basis. Survivors participate in financial literacy sessions integrating goal setting; participants set short-term and long-term goals and develop individualized plans to achieve their financial goals. Monthly support group sessions are held for survivors and family members in order to build social support, reinforce learning, and provide emotional support (Cordisco Tsai et al., 2017). Motivational Interviewing (MI) is integrated into individual and group sessions in BARUG. Company A has found that this program is critical in helping survivors reduce debt and learn financial management and saving skills. Prior to the program, employees struggled with how to manage their finances and requests for salary advances were common. However, these dynamics diminished significantly following graduation from BARUG, and employees reported saving for long-term goals such as housing and education.

Mindfulness practice

Employees often bring significant stress from their home environment into the workplace and can have difficulty settling into the workday. Consequently, several years ago Company A institutionalized a 5-minute guided group mindfulness exercise at the start of each shift. Mindfulness is a contemplative tradition of Buddhist origin, often defined as the 'state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present' (Brown and Ryan, 2003: 822). There are many forms of mindfulness practice, and Company A elects to start its practice with a short progressive muscle relaxation and body awareness exercise, recognizing that survivors often experience psychosomatic symptoms, impaired body awareness, and mind–body dissociation (Farb et al., 2015; Hoppera et al., 2018). The remaining time is spent prompting employees to maintain focus on their controlled breathing. Employees report using this breathing technique at both work and home to manage anxiety and anger, and supervisors observed an improvement in workplace behavior and performance following implementation of this practice.

These reported benefits are supported by research on regular mindfulness practice which demonstrate improved mental health and wellbeing, heightened focus, improved cognitive function, and

improved emotional regulation (Davis, 2012; Shonin et al., 2103). Furthermore, emerging research of mindfulness practice in the workplace reports that it can improve stress and strain, emotional wellbeing, work satisfaction, job engagement, and job performance (Good et al., 2016; Hyland et al., 2015). Shonin et al. (2013) outline the proposed mechanisms for the benefits observed in mindfulness interventions, including 'perceptual re-distancing' leading to increased tolerance of maladaptive cognitive or emotional processes, greater exposure to thoughts and feelings leading to reduced anxiety responses, greater self-awareness and self-motivation with improved coping strategies, and reduced autonomic arousal leading to greater levels of relaxation. Underlying these mechanisms are observed changes in the structure and function of the brain, including areas such as the prefrontal cortex and limbic systems which can be negatively affected by anxiety and trauma (Babcock, 2014; Gotink et al., 2016; Schore, 2001). Hence the specific benefits of mindfulness practice for survivors in a workplace are potentially very significant and worthy of further research. Any implementation of mindfulness practice with survivors of human trafficking must be conducted in a trauma-sensitive manner to ensure that mindfuless practice does not exacerbate trauma symptoms (Treleaven, 2018).

Conclusion

Recovering and transitioning from the trauma of human trafficking and poverty is a long-term, complex process. Company A provides a supportive workplace with intentional, holistic strategies designed to enhance core skill development. For employees to be able to embrace this process, the economic stability provided by a living wage is paramount. Economic stability alone does not, however, necessarily confer economic security and independence without the core skills to sustain employment in the face of difficult social situations, including family pressures and demands. While the journey of recovery and reintegration for survivors is unlikely to ever be easily defined or mapped, Company A is partnering with other agencies and academic institutions to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to better understand and enhance this process. It is hoped that this and research from similar contexts will begin to address the significant knowledge gap concerning the determinants of successful and sustained recovery and reintegration, and lead to the development of best-practice guidelines for workplaces employing survivors. Although Company A's programs and impact will continue to evolve, it appears clear that providing safe and supportive environments, economic security, and evidence-informed interventions for core skills development will remain foundational for this endeavor.

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Notes

1. The company name is withheld to protect its business interests and the privacy and confidentiality of employees.
2. A full discussion of the definition of human trafficking is beyond the remit of this article. However, the company's primary referring partner uses the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons to assess whether clients had been trafficked. The authors recognize the difficulties in identifying whether a person has been trafficked and other complexities related to definition (Cordisco Tsai et al., 2018).
3. BARUG means 'to stand up' in Cebuano, signifying that the program endeavors to support the economic empowerment of participants.

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Author biographies

Dr. Laura Cordisco Tsai is a social work researcher and practitioner specializing in human trafficking and gender-based violence (GBV). Her research broadly targets the development of more empowering and effective services for people who have been trafficked, with a specific focus on strengthening economic empowerment and re/integration support programming for trafficked persons in Southeast Asia. Dr. Cordisco Tsai serves as a Fellow at Harvard University Carr Center for Human Rights Policy and as the Executive Director of Eleison Foundation, a private operating foundation that implements and funds empowerment-based programming and research for GBV and human trafficking survivors in the Philippines.

Melinda Gill is a physician with a background in family medicine, women and children's health, and international health programming. She lives in the Philippines where her work includes programs to improve health outcomes among vulnerable populations, including trafficking survivors, and core skills development within the workplace. Her research explores the reintegration process for trafficking survivors through holistic capacity building programs within the workplace.