

# We need to change what people think modern slavery is

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Credit: LT Chan from Pexels

What images does the word "slavery" conjure up in your mind? Men in

iron collars shipped from Africa on huge wooden galleons, forced to work the fields under the whip of the master? Perhaps you think that slavery is an old concept that became obsolete in Britain in 1833 [with the introduction of the Slavery Abolition Act?](#)

If so, you'd be wrong. Sadly, the reality of slavery is that it [continues to exist in our modern world](#) and our belief that this crime is only an artefact of history might be making it harder to detect and disrupt. As psychologists, we are particularly interested in understanding the minds of the victim and the criminal, and are working towards an intervention to encourage a better understanding of exploitation.

## Hidden crimes

The [Walk Free Foundation describes modern slavery](#) as "possessing or controlling another person for your own benefit or to make a profit". One example is a person who has been trafficked into a country to do manual labour. The gang master might confiscate their passport, pay them less than minimum wage for working illegally long hours, and then take back all of this small wage packet to pay for "living expenses", such as housing in a cold warehouse with many other workers and no proper beds, kitchen, or toilet facilities.

Modern slavery and human trafficking are hidden crimes. Just over 2,000 victims were reported in the UK last year, but [some estimates put the real figure as high as 13,000](#).

One of the problems in detecting this crime is that many people may not recognise slavery in action. Members of the public might fail to notice the signs of slavery, while police may not be aware that an offender is committing a crime under the control of another criminal.

Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that some criminals may not

see their actions as "slavery" while some victims may not see themselves as "slaves". One example can be seen in a [recent news report about a man convicted of holding his wife as a domestic slave](#). Many people may view this as a case of domestic abuse, but the control and enforced labour in the home for the benefit of the husband meant that this was legally categorised as modern day slavery.

## Defining terms

One explanation for why a victim and criminal may not perceive a situation as slavery could be a mismatch between the self-schema and the "slavery" schema. A schema is your understanding of all of the elements that make up a certain thing: for example, your schema for a teacher might include using a red pen, wearing glasses, and holding a notebook. Your cognitive schemas are created through experience: to return to our example, if you and your friend attended different types of school then you may hold different schemas for a "teacher".

If you have no personal experience on which to base your schema then you might rely on cultural stereotypes presented in the media. There is a clear media stereotype for slavery, and you can see this instantly recognisable schema if you run an internet search. [Search Google images for "slave"](#) – and almost all of the images will show African males in chains. Think about the concept of "slavery" presented at the start of this article, and consider whether this outdated perception could be the schema for "slave" held by modern criminals and victims.

Our self-schema is our understanding of all the elements that make us up as individuals, and it is clear that this old-fashioned definition of slavery will not match the self-schema of modern victims and criminals. This mismatch between the two could be one reason why victims claim that they are not being held as a slave and perpetrators deny that their relationship with the victim involves slavery.

One strategy for reducing the mismatch between the self-schema and the slavery schema is to educate people about modern slavery. As the stereotype for slavery becomes less dated, then the characteristics of the modern slave and slaver will become more similar to the self-schema held by modern individuals.

## Breaking the chains

The [North Wales Anti-Slavery Project](#), under the guidance of coordinator Jim Coy, has been shining a light on the dark figure of modern slavery by running conferences and training courses to raise awareness of the signs of modern slavery. One incredible success story for the project has been Operation BASE, which resulted in the [rescue of 111 migrant workers](#) living and working in terrible conditions.

We were asked to review the North Wales Anti-Slavery Project as independent experts, and concluded that this project has [taken the first steps towards making North Wales hostile to slavery](#). But more work is needed – and we will be working with the project in the future to explore how psychological interventions could help to change the slavery schemas held by both victims and criminals.

These types of awareness-raising activities and targeted interventions will, [in the words of the leader of the British anti-slavery movement of the 1800s](#), William Wilberforce, ensure that we can never say again that we did not know.

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