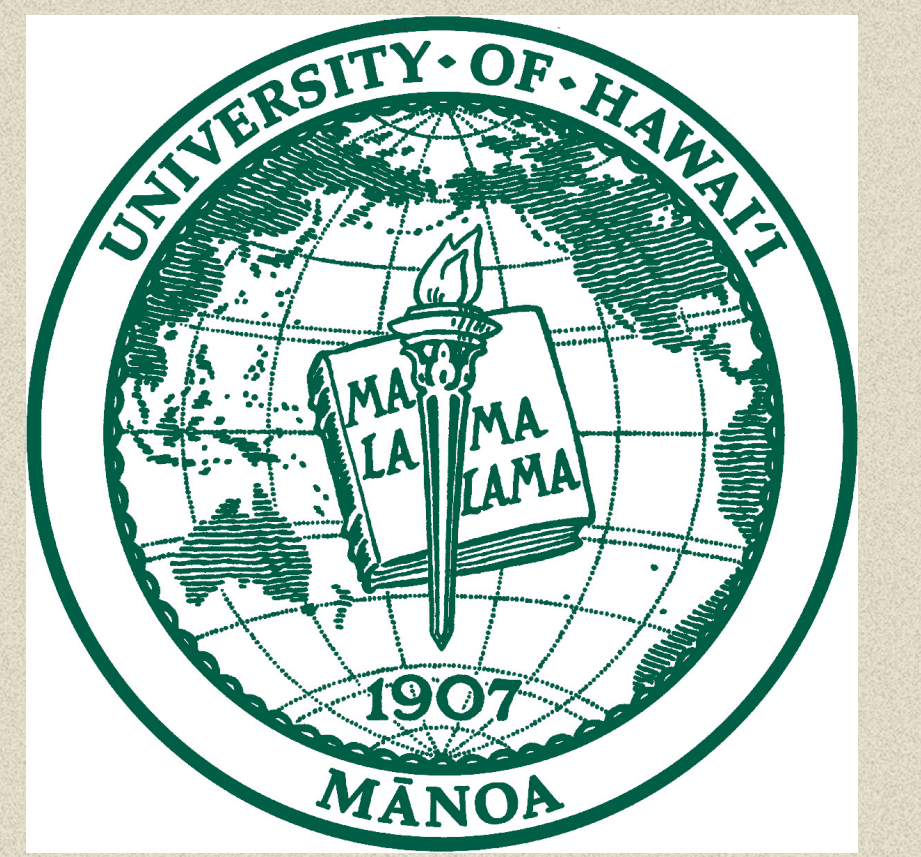# The Complexity of Discourses on Human Trafficking: Sex Trafficking Versus Labor Trafficking

Krissy Gleason, M.Ed, M.A.
Community and Cultural Psychology, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

Introduction

Human trafficking has captured the attention of our nation for more than a decade. However, from the early years of discussion and policy implementation, the issue of trafficking has been plagued by political and ideological controversy (Brennan, 2010). This controversy has played out in national and international policy and politics, in the media, and in academia (Stolz, 2007; DeStefano, 2007). At the heart of the controversy is the definition of human trafficking and the language used to describe it.

The current federal definition of human trafficking includes instances of labor or prostitution that are induced through "force, fraud, or coercion." Additionally, individuals involved in a commercial sex act who are under the age of 18 are also considered victims of sex trafficking with no need to prove coercion (Stolz, 2007). Thus, in current practice human trafficking can involve a wide range of activities (labor or sex) and victim groups (U.S. citizens, immigrants, minors, adults, men, women, etc.) in various combinations. This variety of phenomena and victim groups and the political and ideological controversy surrounding the issue make "human trafficking" a more politically loaded and confusing label than is often recognized by the general public.

As the term "human trafficking" is relatively new and the battle over how to define it is intense, an analysis of the various discourses related to the term could provide both clarity and a means to critique differing constructions based on whether they inhibit or promote social justice. Parker (1992) defines discourse as "sets of meanings which constitute objects." This study used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to systematically chart the ways in which trafficking and related phenomena were "constituted" in the discourses of local service providers in Hawai'i. The portion of the study presented here is focused on comparing and contrasting how sex and labor trafficking were constructed. Additional findings are available upon request.

Method

A total of 13 participants were interviewed from three islands (O'ahu, Maui, and Big Island). These participants had experience working with potential sex ($n = 5$) , labor ($n = 5$), or both ($n = 3$) kinds of trafficking victims. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a combination of CDA techniques and concepts. The analysis took place in three stages: 1) systematic analysis of the various discourse strands and knots present in each interview; 2) analysis of how human trafficking and related phenomena (e.g., prostitution, immigration, etc.) were labeled (nomination) and characterized (predication); and 3) analysis of how important social actors (e.g., traffickers, pimps, victims, etc.) were labeled (nomination) and characterized (predication). Analysis also focused on whether various constructions of the issue promoted social justice or not.

CDA Concepts

Discourse strand: set of discourses on a particular topic, such as immigration, labor, sex, etc. (Jager & Maier, 2009)

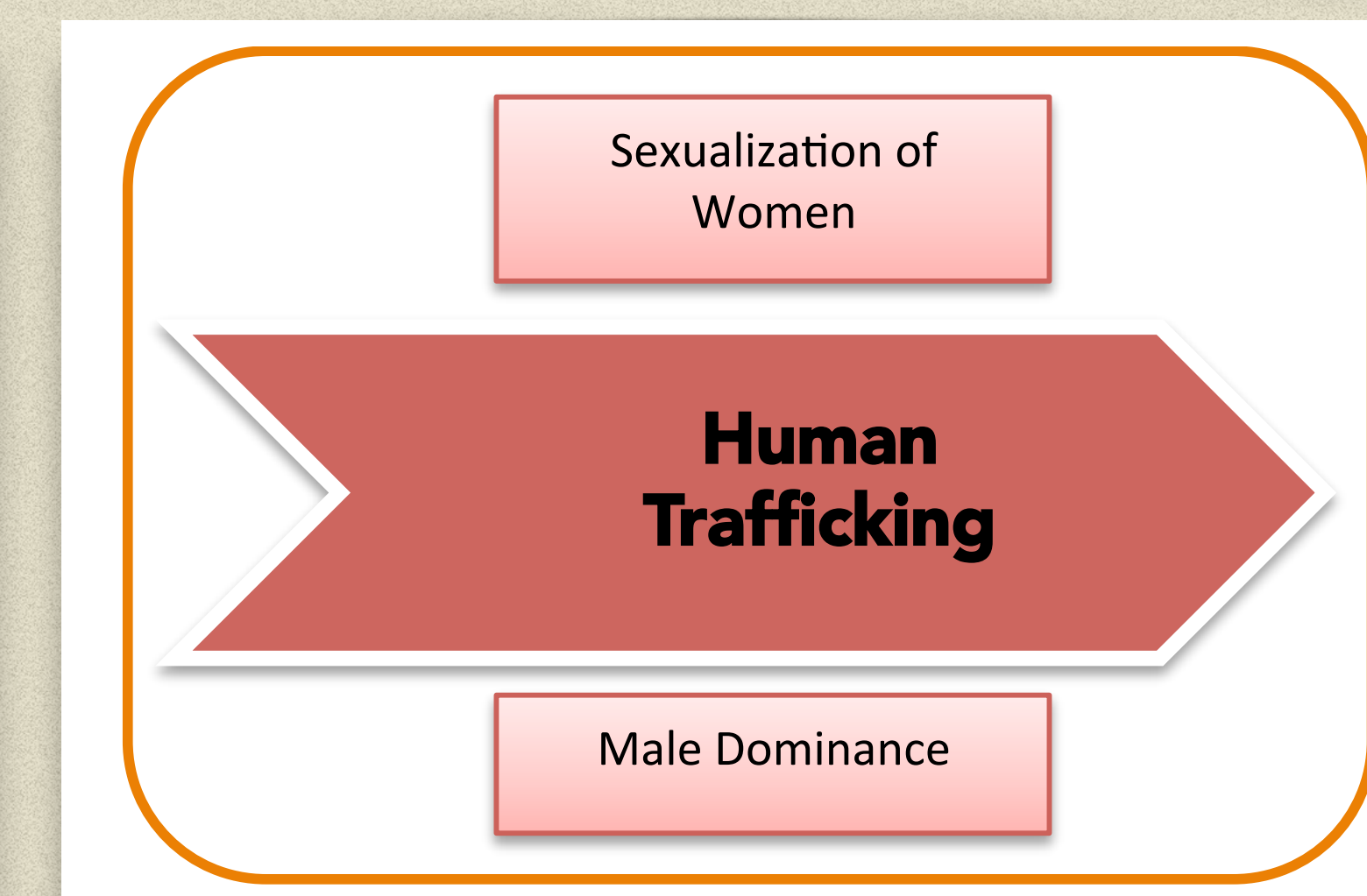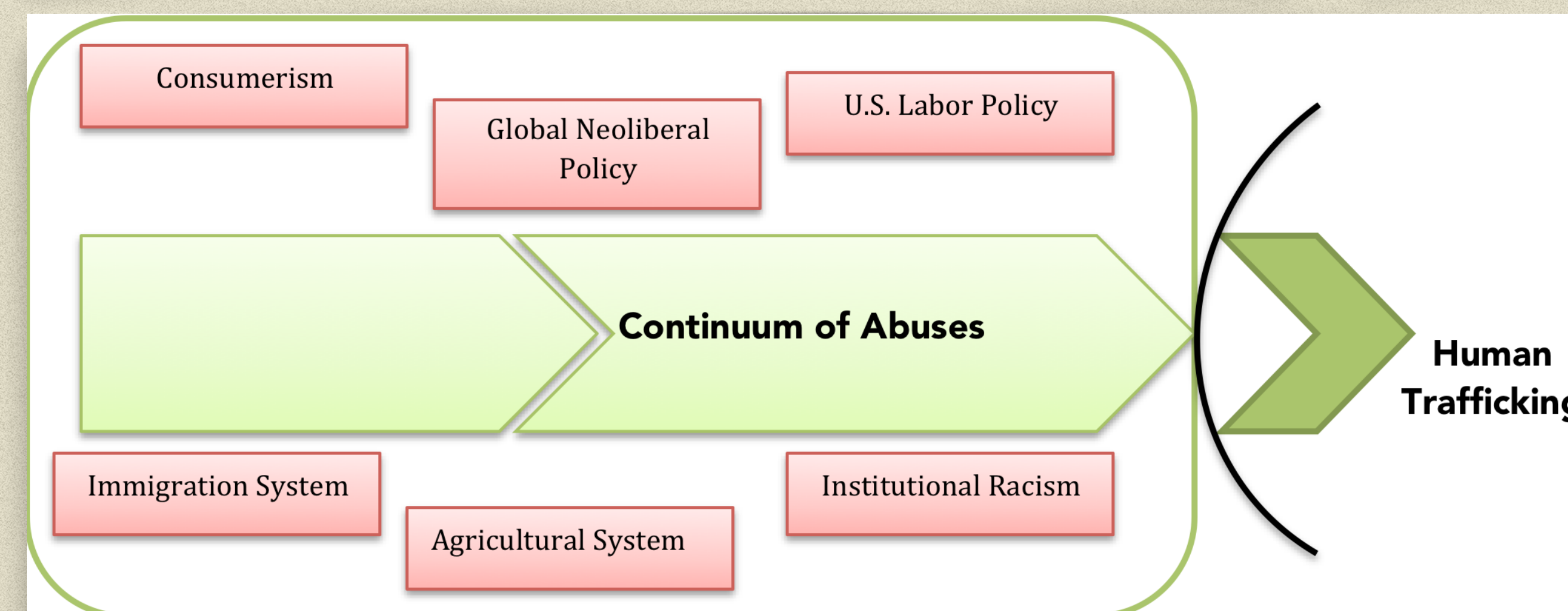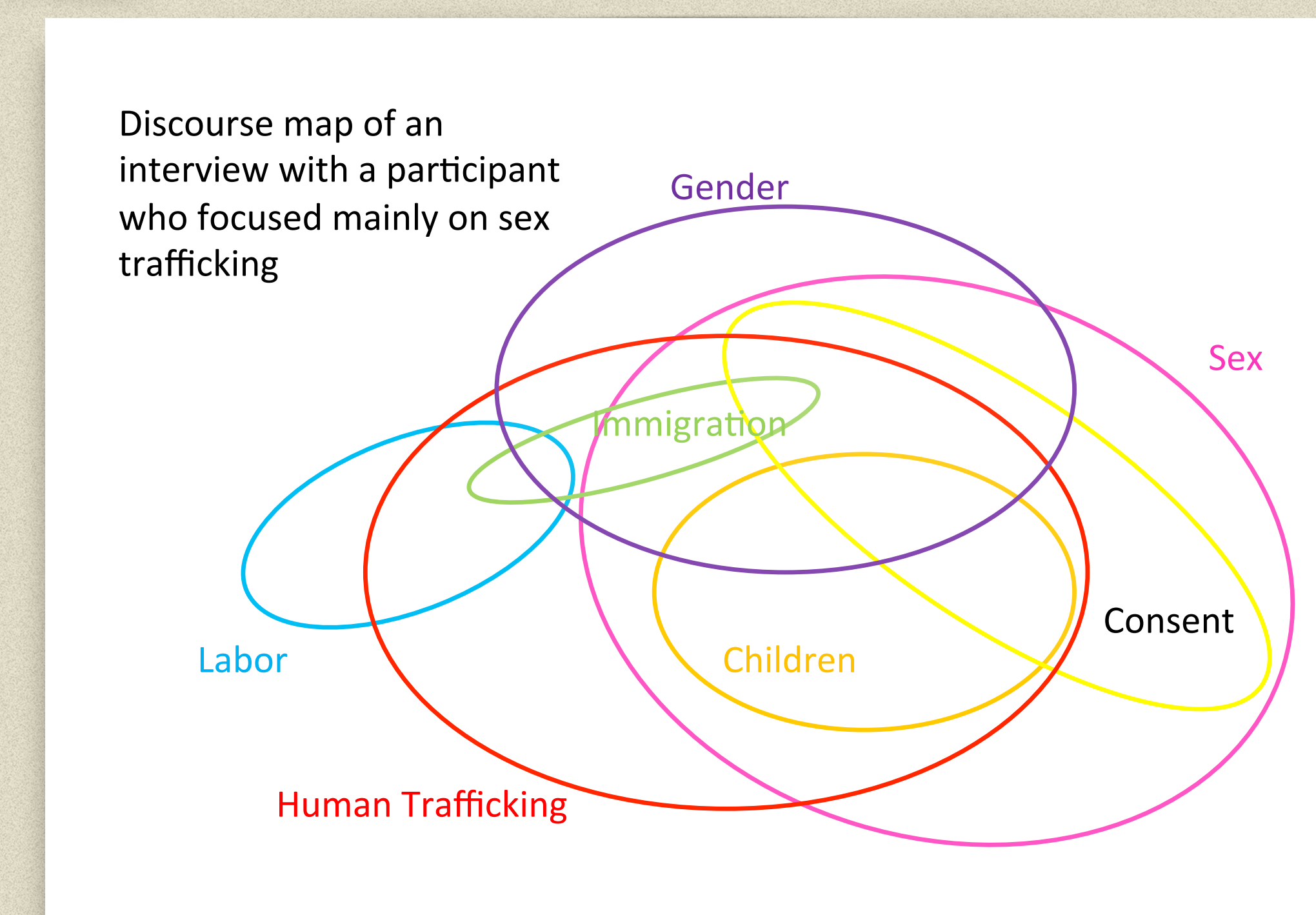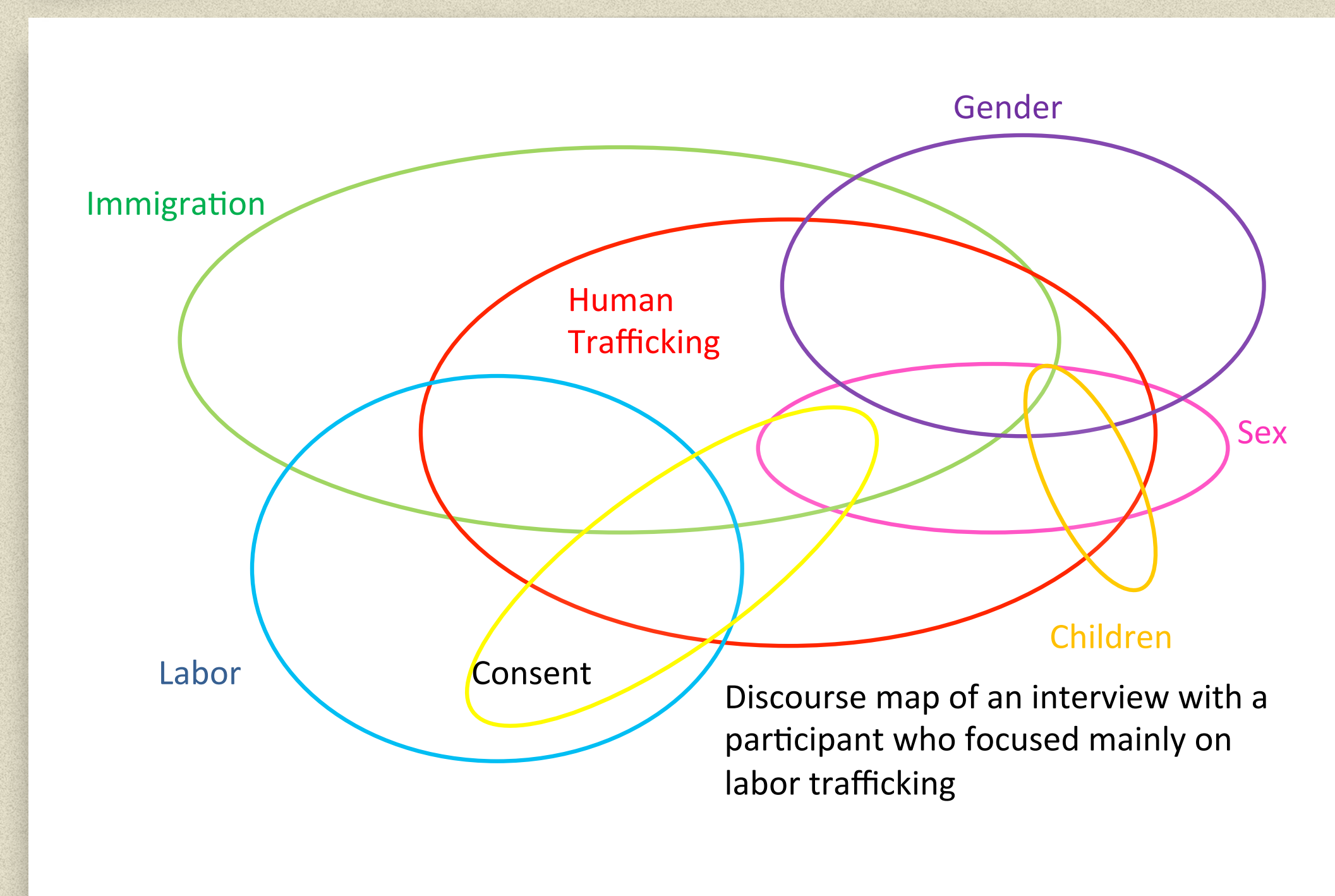Discursive knot: when two or more discourse strands overlap and are entangled (Jager & Maier, 2009)

Discursive map: visual approximation of how often a discourse strand was used (size of circle) and how it tended to be tangled with other strands (degree of circle overlap)

Nomination strategy: how social actors, phenomena, events and/or processes are named or labeled (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

Predication strategy: how these labels are described or qualified with connotations and attributions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

Discourse Strands (Topics) Related to Human Trafficking

Immigration	Sex
Labor	Gender
	Children
Consent	

Discourse map of an interview with a participant who focused mainly on labor trafficking

Discourse map of an interview with a participant who focused mainly on sex trafficking

Results

Participant constructions of human trafficking tended to vary depending on the participant's experience, background, and preferences. This variability underscores the complexity of the issue and potential for confusion. However, there was also some regularity within this variety. The CDA analysis found that there were primarily 6 major discourse strands that were combined in different ways by all participants to discuss human trafficking. Two major and largely separate discursive knots tended to be used to discuss labor trafficking (Immigration/Labor/HumanTrafficking) and sex trafficking (Sex/Gender/Children/HumanTrafficking) as separate phenomena. That issues of labor and sex tended to be almost entirely separate is notable. Additionally, while a few participants with backgrounds in immigration law did discuss immigration-related issues in the context of sex trafficking, the majority discourses related to sex trafficking centered on gender issues or on underage girls (a discourse strand on children). When comparing how labor-related phenomena (migrant labor, labor abuse, etc.) were characterized versus sex-related phenomena (prostitution, Korean hostess bars, etc.), the analysis found that labor trafficking tended to be constructed as the aberrant acts of a few "bad apples," while sex trafficking tended to be constructed as the product of a completely corrupt and corrupting system (the sex industry).

Discussion

This project found that local discourses on human trafficking tended to linguistically divide the issue into two differing characterizations: sex trafficking (largely constructed as a gender issue) and labor trafficking (largely constructed as an immigration and labor issue). In examining the various discourses in terms of whether they promote or inhibit socially just understandings of the phenomena, the CDA analysis found that often these discourses unknowingly support the interests of those in power.

In terms of labor trafficking, the discourses tended to either frame the problem as 1) the practice of a few "bad apples" or 2) an inevitable and unavoidable byproduct of our current agricultural practices. Both constructions support the interests of those in power (citizens vs. immigrants; big agriculture; etc.) by either obscuring the exploitative systemic contexts of these acts or by constructing these contexts as unchangeable. Consistently linking human trafficking to other "lesser" abuses that occur in these systemic contexts can work to promote a more a just view of the problem as the extreme end of a continuum of abuses (Chacón, 2006).

By contrast, many local advocates consistently and systematically constructed the context of sex trafficking (the sex industry) as inherently corrupt and corrupting in its exploitation of women and children. While highly controversial, some international sex worker advocates have raised concerns that this construction of the sex industry casts women as one-dimensional agency-less victims (Kempadoo et al., 2012). Regardless of one's stance on this, becoming more aware of the ways in which we are engaging and deploying different discourse strands in our discussions of human trafficking can bring more clarity and intention to our discursive constructions of the issue.

References

Brennan, D. (2010). Thoughts on finding and assisting individuals in forced labor in the USA. *Sexualities*, *13*(2), 139–152.

Chacón, J. M. (2006). Misery and myopia: Understanding the failures of U.S. efforts to stop human trafficking. *Fordham Law Review*, *74*, 2977–3029.

DeStefano, A. M. (2007). *The war on human trafficking: U.S. policy assessed*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Jager, S., & Maier, F. (2009). Theoretical and methodological aspects of Foucauldian critical discourse analysis and dispositive analysis. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 34–61). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Kempadoo, K., Sanghera, J., & Pattanaik, B. (2012). *Trafficking and prostitution reconsidered: new perspectives on migration, sex work, and human rights*. Boulder, CO.: Paradigm Publishers.

Parker, I. (1992). *Discourse dynamics: Critical analysis for social and individual psychology*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2009). The discourse historical approach (DHA). In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 87–121). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Stolz, B. A. (2007). Interpreting the U.S. human trafficking debate through the lens of symbolic politics. *Law & Policy*, *29*, 311.

Contact

For more information please email me at kdg8@hawaii.edu.