

Towards a Complex-Systems Understanding For Combating Human Trafficking

By Marcel van der Watt

“By gaining an understanding of the characteristics of complexity, we are presented with an opportunity to harness it and to use it advantageously in strategic planning and tactical policy making.”

The global village in which we exist today is incalculably more complex than most of us would dare to comprehend. As human beings we are amongst its constituent parts. Our relationships, ideas, motives, fears, acts of commission and acts of omission are but some of the variables that impact the condition of our village. Globalisation, information and communications technology (ICT), social networking, the role of the media and increasingly effective transportation systems are not only characteristic of holistic development, but also stimulates complexity, which creates opportunities for criminals to use innovative means to commit crime. Numerous studies have reported on the confluence of multiple complexities associated with the combating of human trafficking (1, 2, 3, 4). These studies give credence to the call for a multi-dimensional response to human trafficking as a multi-dimensional threat (5). Human trafficking involves multiple abuses and abusers, requiring special skills and efforts in combating and preventing it. Synergy amongst the

numerous role-players is fundamental to the successful execution of multiple anti-trafficking activities, which needs to be attended to simultaneously. Role players include police, prosecution, welfare and health agencies (that run shelter, protective and children's homes), civil society partners, and the media (6). The sheer volume of role-players involved can be quite significant. Research on the inter-organisational coordination and awareness in a non-profit ecosystem makes reference to one case study where 21 different organisations were enumerated that had to be involved in the identification, intervention and subsequent rescue of a 15-year old victim of sex trafficking (7). Another challenge is the communication and coordination breakdown in anti-trafficking efforts across local, state and federal government (8).

From a criminal investigation perspective it becomes increasingly evident that combating human trafficking cannot be approached by solely relying on con-

“ Understanding and considering the interconnectedness of multiple variables, searching for the hidden transcripts in accounts provided by victims, suspects, witnesses and civil society, and appreciating the significance in seemingly insignificant events...can only empower first responders and investigators with a big picture understanding of the case at hand. ”

ventional investigative techniques. Approaching an investigation with a reductionist lens and ‘cutting up’ the problem into smaller and more manageable parts will only repudiate the complex and non-linear nature of the crime to be solved. The increasingly non-linear nature of criminal investigations is highlighted in the argument by Stelfox (9), who posits that the objectives of criminal investigation has changed and now includes a range of tasks; namely victim care, community reassurance, intelligence gathering, disruption of criminal networks and managing a wide range of crime risks. Increased levels of professionalism in response to the increasingly complex nature of criminal investigations is therefore required if investigators are to perform their role effectively. Furthermore, with reference to the fluctuating responsibilities of the criminal investigator over the past 10 years, “the changing role of the investigator as a specialist, educated and trained to be knowledgeable about complex systems, societal differences and organizational theory” is emphasised (10).

Role-player decision making in the continuum of anti-human trafficking efforts will unavoidably be accosted by some of these challenges. Instead of a mechanical change in our response behaviours to cope with the complexities, we may turn to complex-systems thinking, which equips us with the understanding that decisions cannot be made in isolation

without considering their reverberating and non-linear effects on the entire response strategy. Understanding and considering the interconnectedness of multiple variables, searching for the hidden transcripts in accounts provided by victims, suspects, witnesses and civil society, and appreciating the significance in seemingly insignificant events, documents and relationships between focal areas of the response strategy can only empower first responders and investigators with a “big picture” understanding of the case at hand.

The organisations, structures and systems in which we function continually change between states of stability to that of chaotic instability (11). This underscores the complex and diverse environment within which anti-human trafficking activities take place and results in a variety of problems to be solved. By gaining an understanding of the characteristics of complexity, we are presented with an opportunity to harness it and to use it advantageously in strategic planning and tactical policy making (12). The lure of complex systems thinking is found in its concepts that have been used to characterise social behaviour in the human sciences (i.e. emergence, adaptation, evolution, transformation, path-dependency, learning, diversity, serendipity), and allows the possibility of developing models that capture some of the richness and diversity of human existence (13).

Current studies in which complex-systems thinking are being explored in the human trafficking space includes the conceptualisation of how interactions between the different elements, systems, and sub-systems are interrelated in the development, growth, and maintenance of human trafficking in the Eastern Cape, South Africa (14) and determining the value of complex-systems theory in understanding the multi-stakeholder response to the criminal investigation of human trafficking for sexual exploitation in South Africa (15).

Marcel van der Watt is a lecturer in the Department of Police Practice (University of South Africa). He is passionate about social justice and serves as Case Manager for the National Freedom Network. Marcel previously worked as a hostage negotiator and Hawks investigator in South Africa, where he was responsible for the investigation of human trafficking and organised crime.

References

1. The Centre for Social Justice. 2013. It happens here: Equipping the United Kingdom to fight modern slavery. A policy report by the Slavery Working Group. UK: Centre for Social Justice.
2. Holmes, L. (ed.) 2010. Trafficking and Human Rights: European and Asia-Pacific Perspectives. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
3. Aranowitz, A.A. 2009. Human Trafficking, Human Misery: The Global Trade in Human Beings. London: Praeger.
4. Morehouse, C. 2009. Combating human trafficking. Heidelberg, Germany: Germany VS Research.
5. Nair, P.M. 2010. Human Trafficking: Dimensions, Challenges and Responses. New Delhi: Konark Publishers.
6. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2007. Synergy in Action: Protocol on the Structure and Function of the Integrated Anti Human Trafficking Unit in India. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Regional Office for South Asia: New Delhi.
7. Stoll, J., Edwards, W.K. & Mynatt, E.D. 2010. Inter-organizational Coordination and Awareness in a Nonprofit Ecosystem . Paper delivered at ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, February 6 – 10, Savannah, Georgia, U.S.A.
8. Mosbacher Morris, J. & Wong, S. P. 2013. Improving Anti-Trafficking Co-ordination across Local, State and Federal Government. Cancer InCytes Magazine: Cancer Research and Social Justice, Summer, Volume 2: Issue 1.
9. Stelfox, P. 2009. Criminal Investigation: An Introduction to Principles and Practice. Devon: Willan Publishing.
10. Osterburg, J.W. & Ward, R.H. 2010. Criminal Investigation: A Method for Reconstructing the Past. 6th edition. New Jersey: Anderson Publishing.
11. Leary, R. & Thomas, J. 2011. How Complexity Theory is Changing the Role of Analysis in Law Enforcement and National Security. In Akhgar, B., & Yates, S (eds). Intelligence Management: Knowledge Driven Frameworks for Combating Terrorism and Organized Crime. London: Springer.
12. Leary, R. & Thomas, J. 2011. How Complexity Theory is Changing the Role of Analysis in Law Enforcement and National Security. In Akhgar, B., & Yates, S (eds). Intelligence Management: Knowledge Driven Frameworks for Combating Terrorism and Organized Crime. London: Springer.
13. Merali, Y. & Allen, P. 2011. Complexity and Systems Thinking. In Allen, P., Maguire, S. & McKelvey, B (eds). The SAGE Handbook of Complexity and Management. Los Angeles: Sage.
14. Van der Westhuizen, A. n.d. Co-mapping the maze: A complex systems view of human trafficking in the Eastern Cape. Doctoral research in progress.
15. Van der Watt, M. n.d. Investigating human trafficking for sexual exploitation: A phenomenological exploration towards a complex-systems understanding. Doctoral research in progress.