

Applying Complexity Theory in Responding to Trafficking of Human Beings and Exploitation

OVERVIEW

Dr. Craig Barlow is a practicing Independent Forensic Social Worker and a Criminologist who researches human trafficking. Professionals in the allied fields of law enforcement, social work, education and healthcare face significant challenges in identifying and addressing exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery. Current protocols often assume a linear understanding of exploitation, leading to oversimplified checklists and rigid decision-making frameworks. These approaches do not ease the pressure placed on frontline professionals to prevent vulnerable individuals being exploited, or pursue and prosecute exploiters, often without adequate tools to navigate the complexity of real cases.

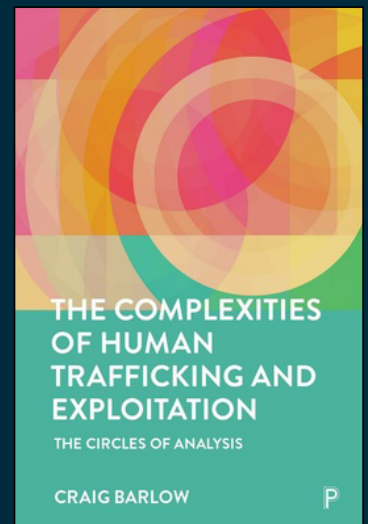
Criticism of professionals for failing to act is often based on the false assumption that identifying exploitation is a matter of 'common sense', disregarding the nuanced, high-stakes decisions all practitioners must make.

This research, conducted with multi-agency input from practitioners, aims to empower professionals across disciplines by enhancing their ability to protect vulnerable individuals and make informed, collaborative decisions in the fight against human trafficking and modern slavery.

It led to "The Circles of Analysis" model, a theoretical framework focusing on the complexities and unique circumstances of each case. This offers a more adaptable and theoretically grounded approach to support multi-agency interventions and addresses the gaps in current safeguarding and investigation practices, by describing human trafficking and exploitation relationally, as patterns emerging from complex systems over time. This helps resolve difficulties in pursuing and prosecuting offenders, assessing risk and safeguarding those who are targeted and abused through trafficking and exploitation.

CONTEXT

The model has been disseminated through publications, conferences and professional training programmes and has been applied and tested in different contexts and jurisdictions. Professionals have found it offers a robust theory for Trafficking of Human Beings (THB) and different types of exploitation and offers the foundation for the development of structured professional judgement (SPJ) protocols and flexible, adaptive interventions.



The Complexities of Human Trafficking and Exploitation by Craig Barlow is published by Policy Press, November 2024

policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/human-trafficking-and-exploitation

Find out more at

bristoluniversitypress.co.uk

 @BrisUniPress
 Bristol University Press
 bristoluniversitypress
 Bristol University Press and Policy Press

 **Policy Press**
PUBLISHING WITH A PURPOSE

FINDINGS

This research synthesises existing theories to create a new framework for understanding human trafficking and exploitation. As the model evolved, new opportunities for inquiry and knowledge emerged. Co-created by the researcher and practice experts, the current iteration reflects practical insights and frontline experiences. Professional feedback from conferences and training events indicates that:

- Approaches informed by the Circles of Analysis model help investigators and safeguarding practitioners navigate the unpredictable dynamics of abusive and exploitative relationships.
- The model captures trafficking, slavery and exploitation as non-linear patterns of behaviour and interactions emerging over time.
- It provides a theoretical framework to explain phenomena like human trafficking for slavery, servitude, forced labour and other forms of exploitation.
- The model enables professionals, investigators, researchers and recovery services to identify, gather and organise evidence effectively.
- A theory-informed approach allows practitioners to objectively articulate patterns of relationships, behaviours and events over time.
- These patterns help draw conclusions about whether current actions and circumstances result from exploitation by a motivated exploiter or group of exploiters.

These multi-disciplinary contributions have already expanded the model's applicability beyond academia, addressing real-world challenges in trafficking and exploitation globally. As such, the theory will continue to grow and adapt, advancing efforts to combat trafficking and exploitation into the future.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Current counter-trafficking protocols often fail to reflect the complexity of THB and exploitation cases, or the challenges faced by practitioners across disciplines. Checklists of "risk factors" used in these protocols are not grounded in theory or empirical evidence. They conflate correlations with causes, leading to a linear, hypothesis-driven approach (if A, then B) that oversimplifies cases and relies on reductive categories.

Terms like 'trafficking' and 'exploitation' are technical, linked to specific criminal offences. Yet, real-life experiences of THB vary widely in terms of victims' relationships with perpetrators, their environments, and their involvement in exploitation.

In order to recognise and describe THB and exploitation in diverse contexts, prevent victimisation or re-victimisation, and disrupt or stop perpetrators, practitioners need to be able to gather information about people and their circumstances. The information available to professionals tasked with responding to such cases is often incomplete, inaccurate and confusing, rendering professional judgement and decision-making a formidable task.

The Circles of Analysis model allows professionals to work collaboratively, share information, identify knowledge gaps and develop new lines of inquiry. It supports evidence-based decision-making and interventions, offering a dynamic approach to preventing trafficking and exploitation, disrupting, pursuing and prosecuting perpetrators and supporting survivors towards safety and recovery.

The Circles of Analysis model provides a robust theory that can inform the development of new and innovative approaches that improve both practice and outcomes for survivors.

Finally it has been suggested that the model may be transferable to areas such as general child abuse, domestic abuse, gangs and radicalisation or counter terrorism. This possibility is being studied further, and the model may require development and adaptation to the specifics of those problems.