

Questioning the Notion of Financial Gain as the Primary Motivation of Human Traffickers

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Observations

The organisation my wife and I lead is a sustainable social enterprise that raises funds for various projects promoting human flourishing, one aspect of which is to understand the relative effectiveness of current anti-trafficking strategies. We undertake awareness-raising and advocacy activities in our local community of urban Australia, as well as networking with anti-trafficking organisations internationally to refine theories of change and generate innovative ideas for anti-trafficking interventions.

In the course of that grassroots work, I have become interested in beliefs about and attitudes towards traffickers. At conferences and in private and public discussions, I have noticed recurring claims about traffickers that, while rarely argued for, nevertheless seem influential. One such claim may be loosely stated as 'the primary motivation of traffickers is financial gain'.

In this article, I briefly examine this claim. I point out some problems with that understanding and suggest that more research is required before we allow that claim to be given too much weight in decision-making about strategies, public policy, or funding.

An early prompt to investigate this subject was a comment by a reviewer about a journal article I wrote. The reviewer dismissed my claim that we know little about traffickers' motives, by responding that 'People exploit others for profit. This is well known throughout the literature.' That view is not anchored in the UN's definition of human trafficking, which only requires the motivation to be

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‘for the purpose of exploitation’,¹ not ‘for profit’, so where did this additional belief originate from? In part, the idea of profit is implied by the context in which the UN’s definition was developed. The *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children* is connected to the UN’s *Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, a convention whose definition of an ‘organized criminal group’ describes its purpose as being ‘to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.’² But a profit motive is often imputed to trafficking without empirical evidence to support the claim.

For instance, one academic claims, without argument, that ‘Human trafficking is economically motivated’ and ‘Human trafficking involves coterries of individuals utilizing the vulnerability of others as a mode of financial gain.’³ Examples can also be found among anti-trafficking practitioners and organisations. For instance, Polaris claims that ‘Human trafficking is the business of stealing freedom *for profit*’⁴ and ‘At its core, human trafficking has two elements: power and profit.’⁵ They interpret ‘profit’ primarily in financial terms and note that something of material value must be exchanged in order for an act to be considered as trafficking.

This belief in the centrality of profit as a motive for traffickers may not be universal but I have read and heard it with sufficient frequency to think that it is widely accepted. Even recent material from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) claims that ‘Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, *with the aim of exploiting them for profit*.’⁶ By implication, if the conduct does not have profit as its aim, then it does not count as trafficking.

The reason I raise this issue is twofold. First, beliefs about traffickers’ motives exert significant influence on policy, law making, and the strategic planning of anti-trafficking interventions. For example, a recent report from the European

¹ United Nations General Assembly, *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children*, supplementing the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, 15 November 2000.

² *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, 15 November 2000, article 2(a).

³ E Denton, ‘Anatomy of Offending: Human trafficking in the United States, 2006–2011’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, pp. 32–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2016.1136540>.

⁴ ‘Human Trafficking’, Polaris, retrieved 20 April 2021, <https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking> (my emphasis).

⁵ ‘Understanding and Reporting Human Trafficking’, Polaris, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9S6AkR4np6g>.

⁶ ‘Human Trafficking’, UNODC, n.d., <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-Trafficking/Human-Trafficking.html> (my emphasis).

Commission claims that human trafficking ‘brings enormous revenues to criminals’ and that ‘Traffickers abuse the vulnerable situation of individuals *to gain profit*’.⁷ Based on such assumptions, the Commission encourages member states to increase the use of financial investigations and prioritise interventions that remove the profits of organised crime.

Second, the simplistic claim that the primary motive of traffickers is financial gain seems unlikely to be universally true. Certainly a few research studies have explicitly reported cases where financial motives were central,⁸ but others have noted more varied and complex motives such as cultural norms that undervalue human life,⁹ loyalty and fear,¹⁰ and psychopathology.¹¹ Generalising the profit motive as though it applies to all traffickers seems unwarranted.

As noted by UNODC, the attribution of ‘financial gain’ includes payment in kind and other material gain rather than merely money.¹² Even with such a broad understanding, however, court records for 140 closed human trafficking cases in the USA showed that 42 per cent of the accused did not knowingly benefit

⁷ *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025*, European Commission, Brussels, 14 April 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/pdf/14042021_eu_strategy_on_combatting_trafficking_in_human_beings_2021-2025_com-2021-171-1_en.pdf (my emphasis).

⁸ See, for example: N Levenkron, ‘Another Delivery from Tashkent’: Profile of the Israeli trafficker, Hotline for Migrant Workers, Tel Aviv, 2007, https://hotline.org.il/wp-content/uploads/Another_Delivery_From_Tashkent_Eng.pdf; M Shively *et al.*, *Human Trafficking Organizations and Facilitators: A detailed profile and interviews with convicted traffickers in the United States*, National Institute of Justice, November 2017; E I Troshynski and J K Blank, ‘Interviews with Human Traffickers: Perceptions of sex and violence’, E C Heil and A J Nichols (eds.), *Broadening the Scope of Human Trafficking Research: A reader*, 2nd Edition, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, 2019.

⁹ S Tiefenbrun, ‘Child Soldiers, Slavery, and the Trafficking of Children’, SSRN Scholarly Paper, 1 October 2007, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1020341>.

¹⁰ R Broad, ‘“A Vile and Violent Thing”: Female traffickers and the criminal justice response’, *The British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 55, no. 6, 2015, pp. 1058–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azv072>.

¹¹ A Hargreaves-Cormany *et al.*, ‘A Typology of Offenders Engaging in the Sex Trafficking of Juveniles (STJ): Implications for risk assessment’, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 30, 2016, pp. 40–47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.06.011>.

¹² UNODC, *Anti-Human Trafficking Manual for Criminal Justice Practitioners: Module 14*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2009, p. 5, https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/TIP_module14_Ebook.pdf.

financially or by receiving something of value from their offence.¹³ The most recent *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* concludes that ‘Recruiting victims may be no more profitable than an annual average salary in a legitimate business.’¹⁴ If many traffickers *do not attain* significant financial gain, is it reasonable to assert that their *motivation* is nevertheless to gain financially? What amount of profit, monetary or otherwise, is sufficient to warrant such an assertion? What does it mean to do something ‘for profit’? Can it be that many cases of human trafficking involve an exchange of money, but that the financial aspect is not the primary motivation? If that were the case, then making trafficking unprofitable may not prevent it.

Another reason for doubting that traffickers abuse the vulnerable situation of individuals to gain profit (or any other single motivation) generalises to all traffickers is the diversity of the forms of abuse and exploitation that fall under the umbrella of human trafficking. Take, for example, the forced recruitment of child soldiers: is financial gain as significant a motivation as ideology? In the case of forced marriage, although money often changes hands, is that as significant a motivation as cultural norms that devalue young women? To the extent that live-streamed sexual exploitation of children depends on a person who pays to direct the abuse remotely, is the financial transaction as important as the sexual pathology of the abuser? In the case of bonded labour in India, profit is essential to the business model, but a more fundamental motivation may be the caste-based ‘myth of paternalism’ that legitimises this business model.¹⁵

Future directions

These observations highlight a need for further research into the primary motivation of human traffickers. Such research could start with more extensive data gathering about the financial aspects of known trafficking cases. But more importantly, we will need to apply current models of the psychology of human behaviour, and the motivational aspects of criminology more thoroughly to human trafficking. Modern psychology has noted that human behaviour is a

¹³ A Farrell, C Owens, and J McDevitt, ‘New Laws but Few Cases: Understanding the challenges to the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases’, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 61, 2013, pp. 139-168, p. 150, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-013-9442-1>.

¹⁴ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2020, p. 14, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>.

¹⁵ A Choi-Fitzpatrick, *What Slaveholders Think: How contemporary perpetrators rationalize what they do*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 12.

function of both the person and their environment.¹⁶ Accordingly, a common distinction in psychological literature is between internal and external sources of motivation.¹⁷ Those distinctions need to be applied in the context of human trafficking.

What can we deduce from the varied research showing that many traffickers were themselves trafficked previously? Do they become traffickers in order to generate profit or because of the dehumanising impact of their own abuse and the complex psychology between them and their own abusers?¹⁸ A similar question can be asked in the light of research showing the centrality of family networks in trafficking.¹⁹ When people are raised in contexts where trafficking has been normalised, they may generate profit and they may behave in ways that are *intended* to generate profit, but does that lead inevitably to the conclusion that financial gain is the primary motivation?

To what extent do ideologies, sexual pathologies, personal and communal identities, experiences of prior abuse, enculturated values, survival, social status, and the will to control others, interact with financial factors to drive traffickers' behaviour? We need research that goes beyond what traffickers *do*, to a deeper understanding of what traffickers *think*. Motivations cannot be deduced solely from outcomes, and consequently we need to interrogate the internal working of the trafficking mind if we hope to design interventions that change traffickers' behaviour.

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¹⁶ K Lewin, *Principles of Topological Psychology*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1936, p. 12.

¹⁷ See, for instance: L Deckers, *Motivation: Biological, psychological, and environmental*, 5th edition, Routledge, New York, 2018.

¹⁸ See, e.g.: Broad.

¹⁹ See, e.g.: K B Warren, 'Troubling the Victim/Trafficker Dichotomy in Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking: The unintended consequences of moralizing labor migration', *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2012, pp. 105–20, <https://doi.org/10.2979/indjgolegstu.19.1.105>.