Editors' introduction

Special issue—illicit networks workshop

Andrew Goldsmith · Georgia Lysaght

Published online: 11 November 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

Editors' introduction

Making sense of the commission of different kinds of crime lies at the heart of much of criminology. While criminals are often thought of and analyzed in individual terms though less so in the case of so-called organized criminals [13, 97], it has become clear through Edwin Sutherland's [12] work on differential association, among other works in criminology and the social sciences, that criminal motivations and techniques are acquired through social relations. That is, people tend to learn from each other how to commit particular kinds of crime. It is also apparent from common observation as well as criminological studies of co-offending that many crimes are committed jointly by two or more people, whether once only or more frequently over time. This relational quality of crime, and the emergence of enduring patterns of criminal co-offending, remind us that crime is typically socially embedded, that crime is often a social activity among other social activities in which individuals engage. In short, the extent and kind of social relationships an individual has will influence whether, and how, he or she decides to get involved in criminal activity and whether this activity is recurrent or limited to one occasion. Given this relational reality of most forms of crime, indeed "[i]t is surprising", as Coles [3: 580] noted, "that a set of techniques developed specifically to investigate 'relational data'.. and derived from the likes of kinship patterns, community structures and interlocking directorships has not proved more attractive to those researching serious crime groups". The set of techniques Coles refers to are those of social network analysis (SNA).

The neglect of network analysis by criminology has diminished significantly in the past decade. A number of scholars in North America and Europe have built upon

Guest editors: Andrew Goldsmith and Georgia Lysaght (University of Wollongong)

A. Goldsmith · G. Lysaght (✉)

Centre for Transnational Crime Prevention, University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia
e-mail: georgial@uow.edu.au

A. Goldsmith
e-mail: agoldsmi@uow.edu.au

the sparser contributions of the 1990s [see for example 6, 11]. Much of the focus of the more recent work [2, 7–9] has been upon organized crime groups and criminal gangs. Fieldwork studies in these areas have shown how fluid and unstable many functioning criminal relationships are. People smuggling operations and drug trafficking groups, to choose two examples of transnational crime groups, depend upon networks in different countries to ensure the logistical chains perform properly. Criminal gangs have proven often to be less enduring than previously thought, or to constitute subsets of wider social formations within which criminal activity is only one kind of focal involvement. Network analysis allows scholars to look at the linkages between individuals and groups, and to study how these relational qualities are significant in explaining the crimes committed. Network analysis can also claim much credit for the now frequently-intoned observations by law enforcement officials as well as academics working in the field that most serious crime groups are ‘dynamic’ and ‘fluid’ in nature, rather than conforming to the stereotype of the more rigid Mafia criminal hierarchy model of criminal organization.

Illicit networks

Crime is just one type of illegal, and typically covert, activity that has come to be analysed using network methods. Raab and Milward [10] and Kenney [5] have examined terrorist groups as well as forms of transnational crime, while Lauchs et al. (this issue) looks at corrupt relationships within policing. Raab and Milward advanced the notion of ‘dark networks’ to embrace activities that are illegal and covert, yet we have preferred the term ‘illicit networks’ in part to reflect the breadth of application of network methods to corruption as well as to organized and transnational crime and terrorism. We have also preferred the terms because we wish to include activities that, while illegal, are not necessarily covert in nature. In kleptocratic states, for example, the involvement of government officials in arms trafficking or other kinds of crime may be quite visible. In general terms, these activities present a challenge for law enforcement and in some cases, constitute national security threats to other states [1]. Understanding how their networked character contributes to their resilience and tactical successes is not just a theoretical concern for scholars. It is also a matter of operational and strategic importance for law enforcement officials and governments. In each case, many ‘battles’ have been won, yet the ‘wars’ against them continue. While some critics of network analysis rightly point to the limitations of this approach in terms of its failure engage deeply with the underlying structural drivers of crime, corruption and terrorism, there remains the fact that law enforcement agencies still don’t know how to contain these activities effectively, let alone be in a position to make a significant contribution to removing underlying causes.

These four papers formed an important part of the first annual Illicit Networks Workshop, held at the University of Wollongong’s Centre for Transnational Crime Prevention (CTCP) on 7 and 8 December 2009. There have been two workshops since then. The Workshop brings together scholars and practitioners with interests in different kinds of illicit networks—organized crime, terrorism and corruption related groups. While some contributors were experienced practitioners in SNA, a range of uses of network concepts was evident among the presenters and indeed encouraged.

Many of those interested in this approach currently are not expert in the specific techniques required by SNA. However, if this group is any indication, more criminologists are taking the time to acquire these skills. In any event, the group was united by their strong interest in drawing upon network analysis and network concepts to enhance understanding of different areas of organized criminal and illicit activity. Around forty presenters and participants gathered on the southern New South Wales coast of Australia for this event, which drew keynote speakers from the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States of America. The Workshop series is now jointly sponsored by CTCP and the University of Montreal's Centre for International and Comparative Criminology.

Carlo Morselli, of the University of Montreal, has contributed the first paper for this special issue. Morselli has indeed pioneered the study of criminal networks over the last decade. His milestone contribution in 2009, *Inside Criminal Networks* [8] further consolidated his standing in this area. Morselli's paper, given as a keynote address at the first Workshop, presents the results from a study of an illegal firearms market in Quebec. The study draws upon interviews with twenty individuals, 13 of whom were incarcerated at the time of interview. Morselli found, *inter alia*, how easy it was for individuals to source firearms in that market among friends and acquaintances. In other words, opportunities to acquire guns recurred over time in the social milieux to which they belonged; these individuals were not limited to one or even a few potential sources in order to get hold of firearms. Among his other findings was the identification of a group of what he calls 'law abiding' illegal firearm acquirers, those who are prepared to enter the illicit market to build their collection of firearms.

In its own way, each paper deals with the "missing data problem" [12: 95]. In network analysis in these areas, data is rarely if ever complete or readily freely available. What is used by scholars is always incomplete in some way or other, rendering the findings open to challenge. The highly 'law enforcement-centric' nature of the data used by many scholars constitutes a recurrent challenge that continues to exercise the scholarly community of criminal network analysts. The four papers reflect a diversity of data sources for the purposes of network analysis. While the first paper relied upon face-to-face interviews, the second paper by David Bright, Caitlin Hughes and Jenny Chalmers employs the published sentencing comments of trial and appeal judges to explore the scale and nature of a particular amphetamine production and trafficking network in New South Wales, Australia. The paper discusses the various data sources commonly used for network analysis, examining their advantages and limitations. In the case of this paper, the freely available nature of the data made it an attractive source, bypassing the often challenging obstacles of obtaining informed consent and cost raised by other methods. Bright et al. were able to establish by this method how the network studied relied upon multiple clandestine laboratories, corrupt officials and loosely structured networks to conduct their activities.

The third paper looks at criminal networks in Colombia and Mexico, using a formal SNA approach. More than a decade ago, scholars and policy-makers talked fearfully about the potential 'Colombianization' of Mexico, as Mexican groups became more prominent in the sourcing and distribution of cocaine in the Americas. While opinions differ today as to how much this process has indeed occurred, there

is no doubting the remarkable growth in the power and destructive violence of Mexican drug trafficking organizations in the past decade and hence the seriousness of this shift for the crime-politics nexus in Mexico. Luis Jorge Garay Salamanca, a Colombian scholar working in Mexico, and Eduardo Salcedo-Albaran integrate their understandings of these two countries in order to examine the institutional effects of criminal networks upon local, regional, and national authorities in both countries. Using a variety of conceptual tools they have developed, they seek to “identify and analyze those social situations in which lawful and unlawful agents or groups establish agreements in order to manipulate and reconfigure some key formal institutions that may be useful for legitimating and protecting the interests of those agents or groups involved.” Taking three case studies, two drawn from Colombia of what are sometimes called ‘narco-paramilitary’ groups, and the other of the *Familia Michoacana* in Mexico, they apply their concepts of *state-capture*, *co-opted state reconfiguration*, and *corruption* to the case studies, and report their findings in terms of the level and forms of state capture and influence. Their data is drawn from judicial and administrative records.

In the final paper, Mark Lauchs, Robyn Keast and Daniel Chamberlain apply network methods to the world of systemic police corruption. Police crime, it should be remembered, is often another form of organized crime, though it is less likely to be transnational in character compared to many other forms of organized crime. This Australian study draws upon historical materials relating to police corruption in the state of Queensland in the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, the study draws upon the materials from the Fitzgerald commission of inquiry into political and police corruption [4] as well as an autobiography by one of the leading figures in this notorious Australian public corruption scandal. One of the key themes explored in this paper is that of *resilience*. Like many other jurisdictions, Australia has struggled through numerous royal commissions and other official inquiries addressing this perennial problem over more than a century. This characteristic of Queensland police corruption emerged clearly from the Fitzgerald inquiry findings. It pointed to the diverse and entrenched nature of the supports for corrupt practices over many years. In many cases, the relationships between corrupt politicians and corrupt police officials were anything but covert, as well as being crooked. Interestingly, Lauch et al. account identifies the contribution of the police employee’s union in the perpetuation of the corrupt state of affairs. The networks between police union officials and government ministers have not uncommonly worked to undermine the authority of police commissioners in Australia as well as posing a threat to the operation of integrity mechanisms intended to address police corruption.

In conclusion, this special issue signals the emergence of a criminological ‘community of practice’ around illicit networks that links scholars in Australia working on these issues with other scholars in North America and elsewhere that share these interests. This is occurring at a time when the official discourse of government crime commissions, law enforcement agencies, and counter-terrorism agencies in Australia, Canada, the United States of America and the European Union is increasingly picking up and reflecting the language of network analysis. As noted earlier, we have preferred a broader inclusive notion of network analysis than is implied by the strictures of SNA. However, methodological challenges continue to demand the attention of scholars working on illicit network studies, so that further

refinement of current approaches can be expected. The participation of government and law enforcement officials in each of the three workshops held to date is an encouraging sign of the potential and indeed actual 'relevance' of what criminologists and other scholars working on illicit networks. In other words, this area is becoming one of the relatively few areas of criminology where there is a visible, enduring shared interest by scholars and practitioners alike in the subject-matter. This achievement is to be valued and encouraged. In future we hope that special issues such as this one will reflect this alignment more directly through the inclusion of papers by practitioners as well as scholars.

References

1. Arquilla, J., & Ronfeldt, D. F. (Eds.). (2001). *Networks and Netwars: The future of terror, crime, and militancy*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
2. Braga, A. A., Kennedy, D. M., Waring, E. J., & Piehl, A. M. (2001). Problem-oriented policing, deterrence, and youth violence: an evaluation of Boston's operation ceasefire. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 38(3), 195–225.
3. Coles, N. (2001). It's Not *What* You Know- It's *Who* You know that counts: Analysing serious crime groups as social networks. *British Journal of Criminology*, 41(4), 580–594.
4. Fitzgerald, G.E. (1989). Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct (Fitzgerald Report). GoPrrit
5. Kenney, M. (2007). *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
6. McCarthy, B., & Hagan, J. (1995). Getting into street crime: The structure and process of criminal Embeddedness. *Social Science Research*, 24(1), 63–95.
7. McGloin, J. M., & Kirk, D. S. (2010). An overview of social network analysis. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 21(2), 169–181.
8. Morselli, C. (2009). *Inside Criminal Networks*. New York: Springer.
9. Natarajan, M. (2006). Understanding the structure of a large heroin distribution network: A quantitative analysis of qualitative data. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 22(2), 171–192.
10. Rabb, J., & Milward, H. B. (2003). Dark networks as problems. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 13(4), 413–439.
11. Sparrow, M. K. (1991). The application of network analysis to criminal intelligence—an assessment of the prospects. *Social Networks*, 13(3), 251–274.
12. Sutherland, E. H. (1949). *White Collar Crime*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
13. von Lampe, K. (2009). Human capital and social capital in criminal networks: Introduction to the special issue on the 7th Blankensee Colloquium. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 12(2), 93–100.