ELICITING INFORMATION FROM MEMORY ABOUT CRIMINAL GANGS AND TERRORIST CELLS

A new method for supporting the recall of information from memory has been devised to help source handlers elicit information about people involved in criminal networks.

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INTRODUCTION

Obtaining detailed and comprehensive information from informants about the relationships between individuals involved in crime gangs, terrorist cells, and other criminal networks is a key task for source handlers. Understanding the structure and organisation of networks can inform effective disruption or infiltration of activities. Informants often have detailed and rich understandings of social groups they observe or are part of – but eliciting a clear picture of complex relationships and interactions in the course of a debriefing can present a challenge.

To date, although sophisticated analytic techniques, such as social network analysis, have been developed to describe and structure intelligence on criminal or terrorist networks, little attention has been paid to techniques for systematically eliciting information from sources about the structure of target groups, gangs, cells or networks, i.e. who is involved and the nature of relationships between key individuals.

WHO'S WHO IN A GANG? A CHALLENGE FOR MEMORY

Generating a list of people involved in a gang or network is fundamentally a memory task. As such, it is vulnerable to the well-documented fallibilities of human memory. When people are asked to generate lists from memory, errors frequently occur. Some information may be forgotten or left out (errors of omission) and incorrect information might be included (errors of commission). Both types of error are problematic in the HUMINT context.

Failure to identify relevant individuals in a network may result in a dangerous intelligence gap. Meanwhile, allocating scarce resources to investigate individuals who are not involved is wasteful, and may distract from more relevant targets.

The Reporting Information about Networks and Groups (RING) task has been developed to improve recall and reporting of information about people involved in groups and networks – providing source handlers with a useful technique for eliciting this kind of information.

The technique draws on a relatively simple idea: that visually representing the links between people facilitates recall of individuals who associate with that particular group or network, and prompts recall of additional individuals who might otherwise go unmentioned.

Our understanding of how memory works supports this approach. First, memory for one member of a network should serve as a cue for other relevant individuals and prompt a more comprehensive retrieval of information. Second, a visual representation of the network capitalises on how memory is organised and should prompt additional recall as a result.

Beyond benefits for memory, a visual description of complex relationships and networks should also provide an interviewer with a better knowledge of them – allowing for a more thorough interrogation of these relationships in further questioning.

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The RING task enables sources to provide qualitative information about the nature of the relationships between individuals

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The RING task might also be used to probe for information about specific gatherings or meetings, the people involved in them and the relationships between them.

WHAT IS THE RING TASK?

The RING task is a reporting format designed to elicit as much information as possible about individuals involved in a group or network, the links (i.e. relationships) between those individuals, and the strength, direction and proximity of relationships.

At the most basic level, this instruction can be used to prompt a source to work on a paper-and-pen diagram of the network in question during a debriefing. However, using open-source software, we have also developed an electronic version of the RING task.

The electronic version of the RING task offers greater functionality (i.e. more options for representing relationships in a systematic way) than simple paper-and-pen diagrams and supports a standardised reporting format that is intuitive to use and edit.

The RING task enables sources to provide qualitative information about the nature of the relationships between the individuals mentioned, including:

• the perceived importance of particular individuals within the network

• the perceived strength of the relationship between individuals

• the perceived mutuality of the relationship and the direction of power or information flow.

For example, a person with status or importance who has a leadership role might be represented by a larger node in the diagram illustrating the network, with one-directional links to other members. Whereas, stronger relationships between certain individuals might be represented by a thicker (cf. thinner) mutual link connecting them [see Figure 1].

Proximity (i.e. how closely the different nodes are positioned) might be used to reflect closer or more distant involvement. These distinctive visual features (larger nodes, thicker lines, proximity, directional markers) should facilitate a clearer and more intuitive understanding of the nature of the relationships between individuals well beyond that which might be conveyed in a list or complex verbal narrative – or even a basic paper-and-pen version of the task.

IS THE RING TASK EASY TO USE?

Using an experimental methodology analogous to an intelligence-gathering context, members of the public (N = 124) were asked to generate a visual representation of the 'network' of individuals attending an event with family members or friends using the RING task software.

A key goal of this research was to establish whether members of the public, with no specialist skills, could use the software effectively and with minimal training, to illustrate, in an easy-to-interpret visual format, networks or groups of individuals involved in a personally experienced event.

All research participants successfully generated visual representations of the relationships between people attending a social event within the past 12 months using the software. The groups or networks represented in the RING task output diagrams also reflected effective use of the software functionality with respect to 'describing' the nature of the relationships between individuals. [See Figure 1].

Figure 1. Example of relationships reported using RING task software (real names have been removed to preserve anonymity).

Panel A: Example of relationships at a family event reported using RING task software.

Panel B: Example of relationships in a friendship event reported using RING task software.

Panel C. Example of relationship clusters reported using RING task software.
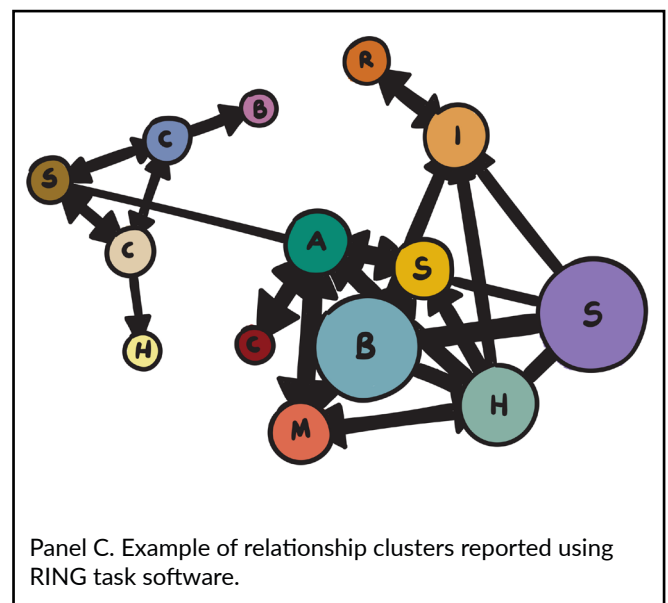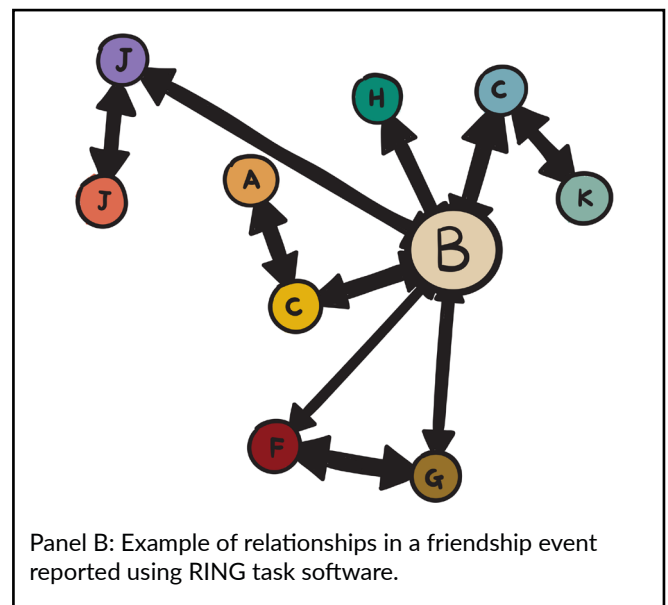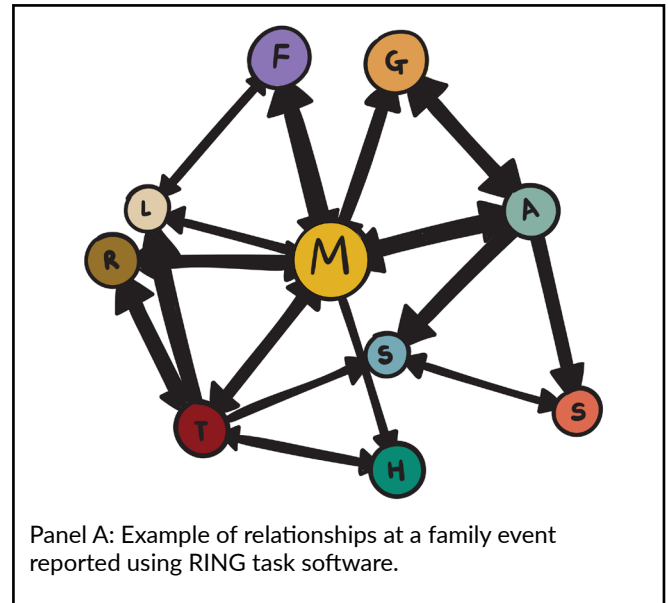
INTEGRATING THE RING TASK WITHIN A DEBRIEFING

The RING task is most likely to be beneficial at the outset of a longer or phased debriefing as part of an initial 'download' of information which can then be strategically explored later in the debriefing. As such, it might be used in conjunction with other tools and techniques, such as the *Timeline Technique*.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Below are some points to consider before using the RING task:

1. THE INTERVIEWEE

Is the interviewee likely to be comfortable using the software – or is a low-tech format using pen and paper (or even a fixed surface, such as a whiteboard) more appropriate?

2. DEBRIEFING CONTEXT

What format is most appropriate in the context? Is the necessary equipment (e.g. laptop or tablet) readily available? Is the debriefing being conducted in person or remotely?

3. CAPTURING THE INTELLIGENCE

How will the task output be retained? Is recording the reporting session an option?

4. INTERVIEWER SKILL

The interviewer should be familiar with the software and able to guide the interviewee and respond to questions. (Note that instructions are directly accessible in the software at all times.)

5. USING A TALK ALOUD PROTOCOL

Consider inviting the interviewee to 'talk aloud' either when completing the task or afterwards once they have completed the task. This kind of 'talk-through' may benefit interviewer understanding, prompt additional recollections, and also facilitate reporting of additional information beyond the direct scope of the task.

6. EDITING AND CORRECTING

Editing and correcting while completing the exercise should be encouraged – use a general instruction to emphasise the importance of accurate and comprehensive information.

7. OFFLINE AND ONLINE

The RING task can be downloaded for use offline if no internet connection is available.

SOFTWARE ACCESS

The RING task software can be accessed for free here: https://forcegraph.netlify.com/; for a demonstration video, see here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jGHCFa0XSM

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READ MORE

Hope, L., Kontogianni, F., Geyer, K. & Thomas, W. D. (2019). Development of the Reporting Information about Networks and Groups (RING) task: a method for eliciting information from memory about associates, groups, and networks. *The Journal of Forensic Practice*. https://doi.org/10.1108/JFP-04-2019-0011