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Developmental Differences in Burglary Behaviour: Examining the Influence of Domain Specific Expertise

Paper presented at ANZSOC, Canberra, November 2008

Joe Clare & Anna Ferrante UWA Crime Research Centre

Research funded by the Western Australian Office of Crime Prevention, Grant Number RDF020708



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What I want to talk about today

- What has been done so far?
 - Burglary as a form of domain-specific expertise
- What we wanted to do?
- How did we go about it?
- What did we find?
- Why does this matter?



What has been done with respect to Burglary *Expertise*

- Cognitive Psychology on expertise:
 - Reproducible and superior
 - Domain-specific: performance and memory
 - Developed via imperfect methods
 - Deliberate practice and relevant feedback required
 - More than just duration of exposure
- 2 main strategies have been used to explore burglar expertise:
 1. Experimental scenarios
 2. Interview-based studies



Findings from experiments and interviews

- Experiments: Relative to non-offending controls, burglars display
 - Homogeneous target attractiveness ratings
 - Superior *burglary-relevant* memory performance (e.g., locks, alarms, signs of occupancy, etc.)
 - Highly systematic analysis of information
 - Quicker to process burglary-relevant information
- Interviews: asking burglars about what they do
 - Highly homogeneous behaviours for entering and searching property
 - Tendency to target similar *types* of properties
 - Utilise predictable search patterns, consistent with *automaticity*



What's missing from this research?

- No examination of within-burglars variation
 - The trend has been to compare burglars with non-offending controls
 - The assumption here is: just doing some (unspecified quantity/type/etc.) burglaries makes an *expert* burglar.



Previous approaches to distinguishing between burglars

- There have been some previous attempts to discriminate between burglars:
 - Low-, middle-, and high-level (Maguire & Bennett, 1982)
 - Planners, searchers, opportunists (Bennett & Wright, 1984)
 - Largely subjective
- Topalli's (2005) framework for characterising offending expertise:
 - **Perceptual** skills: how to *assess* the crime setting
 - **Procedural** skills: how to *carry out* a crime



Hinting at within-burglars variation in perceptual skills

- Proxy: pre-burglary decisions and target selection
- Longitudinal change in motivation for burglary
 - Initially friends and boredom, trending towards need for drugs
- Small sub-sections of offenders burgle less frequently following greater preparation resulting in enhanced success
- Varying capacity to evaluate multiple situational cues
- Mixed influence of target hardening techniques
 - *Deter* some but *motivate* others



What about within-burglars variations in procedural skills?

- Estimated by: script utilisation and capacity to generate income
- Varying degrees of automaticity of burglary execution:
 - Range: (a) no script, (b) deliberate, predictable search pattern, (c) deliberate strategy alteration to reduce likelihood of detection
- Relationships observed between memory and offending history, but not between memory and age.
- Sub-sections of burglars who display greater awareness of property value:
 - CRAVED framework (concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable, and disposable)



What we wanted to do...

- Interim conclusions from existing research:
 - Relative to non-offenders, burglars *do* develop domain-specific expertise
 - Formal evaluation of divergent perceptual and procedural within-burglar skill has not yet been undertaken
- Objectively classify burglar expertise:
 - Is this possible?
 - Do the skills of objectively classified *experts* differ systematically from objectively classified *novices*?



Who are our burglars?

- 209 incarcerated offenders:
 - 16yrs to 48yrs (mean = 26.6yrs)
 - First burglary committed on average at 13.4yrs
 - Drug use was highly prevalent within this sample

- Structured interview:
 - Demographic information
 - Most recently committed burglary
 - First even burglary
 - General burglary career information



Our approach to objectively classifying burglar expertise

- Informed by previous research – 5 classification variables selected:
 1. Estimates of total lifetime burglaries (**N**)
 - 1 = 'less than 10' to 6 = 'over 100'
 2. Estimates of burglary frequency when offending most prevalent (**F**)
 - 1 = 'N/A: less than 10 burglaries ever' to 'Daily'
 3. Estimated income per burglary when offending most prevalent (**M**)
 - 1 = 'N/A: less than 10 burglaries ever' to 'over \$1,000 per burglary'
 4. Estimated total number of burglary charges received (**C**)
 5. Duration (yrs) between first burglary and participation in research (**D**)

The *Expertise* calculation



Variable	Min	Max	Mean	<i>sd</i>	<i>se</i>	Median	Q1	Q3
Lifetime burglaries (<i>N</i>)	1	6	3.62	1.97	0.14	4	2	6
Frequency at most prolific (<i>F</i>)	1	6	4.06	2.02	0.14	5	2	6
Earnings at most prolific (<i>M</i>)	1	6	4.37	2.07	0.14	6	3	6
Burglary charges (<i>C</i>)	1	500	19.56	41.03	2.84	6	3	20
Burglary duration (yrs) (<i>D</i>)	1	33	13.15	6.92	0.48	13	8	17

$$Expertise = \left[\frac{N + F + M}{3} \right] * C * D$$

Expertise: mean = 1,520, Q1 = 84, Q3 = 1,473

Expertise \leq Q1 = *Novices*

Expertise \geq Q3 = *Experts*

(*N* = 53 per group)



What did we find? Examining the first ever burglaries

- Despite expectations, differences were observed:
 - Novices more fearful of apprehension (this pattern held for most recent offences)
 - Experts more likely to have offended in company (32% vs. 13%)
 - Experts younger (11.0yrs vs. 16.9yrs)
- No indication of expert superiority at first burglary for target selection or disposal of property



Perceptual superiority of experts: most recent (MR) & career (C) burglaries

- (MR) Experts less likely to burgle a house where they knew one of the residents (5% vs. 21%)
 - Enhanced awareness of risk
 - Already determined that people they knew didn't have property of value
- (C) Experts more likely to have stolen-to-order (64% vs. 28%)
 - Pre-determined, superior distribution strategy
- (C) Experts always more motivated to burgle
- (C) Experts more inclined to target every type of target
- (C) Experts less deterred by all target hardening techniques



Procedural superiority of experts – 1

- (MR) Experts more likely to possess and utilise cognitive scripts (perceived typicality: 72% vs. 41%)
- (MR) Experts travelled further from home (67% > 3kms vs. 47%)
- (MR & C) Findings consistent with CRAVED expectations:
 - Experts more likely to target small electronic items, cash, jewellery & drugs
 - Novices targeted rapidly dating electronic items
- (C) Experts were more skilled at disposing of stolen goods via all examined outlets – except family/friends, which they were less inclined to use

Procedural superiority of experts – 2



- (C) Experts were better able to convert stolen goods into drugs when trading when dealers:
 - 43% experts traded for heroin at some stage vs. 21% novices
 - 91% experts traded for speed, 62% novices
- (C) Qualitative analysis revealed experts' superior strategies for conducting stolen goods transactions:
 - Some overlap: common response of $\frac{1}{3}$ of new price based on research
 - Novices:
 - Uncertain how prices were determined, left bartering to others or accepted first offers
 - Experts:
 - Shopping around for best offers and increasingly complex negotiations (e.g., drugs & money, bulk deals, etc.)



A quick recap of what we found

- Unexpected differences were observed between objectively classified experts and novices at the first offence
- Strong indications that objectively classified burglars possessed superior perceptual and procedural burglary skills
 - Possession of domain-specific strategies
 - Less likely to target a known victim
 - More motivated against all targets
 - Less deterred by target hardening
 - Travel further distances
 - Select goods consistent with CRAVED expectations
 - Exclude family/friends from disposal, and better able to dispose of goods via all other avenues
- No indication of superior burglary performance for novices at any stage

What does this all mean?



- Supplements previous research indicating burglars can develop domain-specific expertise
- Extends previous findings displaying systematic perceptual and procedural skill variation as a function of objectively defined expertise
- The expertise measure developed here represents a starting point:
 - Requires refining and replication with future research
- Findings supportive of developmental criminology expectations:
 - Earlier onset offending behaviour & broader contextual influences for experts
- For the future – Novel situational crime prevention strategies should target expert offenders:
 - Expertise known to be highly domain-specific and brittle in other domains
 - SCP strategies to disrupt knowledge application through novel task demands



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