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

Paper presented at ANZSOC, Canberra, November 2008

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Examination of Systematic Variations in Burglars’ Domain-Specific Perceptual and Procedural Skills

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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 ($N$)
   - $1 = \text{‘less than 10’ to 6 = ‘over 100’}$

2. Estimates of burglary frequency when offending most prevalent ($F$)
   - $1 = \text{‘N/A: less than 10 burglaries ever’ to ‘Daily’}$

3. Estimated income per burglary when offending most prevalent ($M$)
   - $1 = \text{‘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

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

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

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

*Expertise* ≤ Q1 = *Novices*  
*Expertise* ≥ 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 ⅓ 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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