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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

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- 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

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Variable	Min	Max	Mean	*sd*	*se*	Median	Q1	Q3
Lifetime burglaries (*N*)	1	6	3.62	1.97	0.14	4	2	6
Frequency at most prolific (*F*)	1	6	4.06	2.02	0.14	5	2	6
Earnings at most prolific (*M*)	1	6	4.37	2.07	0.14	6	3	6
Burglary charges (*C*)	1	500	19.56	41.03	2.84	6	3	20
Burglary duration (yrs) (*D*)	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 ≤ 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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Contact Details

Joe Clare

Research Fellow

Crime Research Centre

University of Western Australia

Ph: +61 8 6488 7878

Email: joe.clare@uwa.edu.au