

Discussion paper

The Psychological Understanding of Domestic Burglary

This paper discusses research and theory on the psychology of domestic burglary. Burglary is one of the most common offences in the U.K. and has a great financial and psychological effect on the populace. First, we examine research exploring the choices made during the burglary of a domestic property. Second, we discuss research investigating the actions performed within a house during a domestic burglary. The implications of this research are highlighted throughout. Finally, we discuss how to move forward and tackle the resurgence in burglary offence rates by focusing on rehabilitation, not just prevention.

In the United Kingdom, burglary is defined as three classes of actions, all of which involve trespassing, to either: (1) take another's possessions, (2) assault an individual, or (3) vandalise an individual's property (Theft Act, 1968). Most predominantly, research on domestic burglary focus upon the first class of actions (i.e., taking another's possessions). Research on burglary has mainly focused on the environmental and situational factors that help facilitate offending, which helped inform strategies to deter burglars from targeting domestic properties (e.g., Neighbourhood Watch; Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design). Despite these schemes being implemented in the early 1960's and continuing through until the mid-2000s, national statistics and research has shown there was little effect, as burglary rates continued to rise to their peak in the 1990's (Bennett, Holloway, & Farrington, 2008; Office for National Statistics, 2019). Since then, burglary has remained a high-volume crime causing society and victims great financial, psychological, and physical distress (Beaton, Cook, Kavanagh, & Herrington, 2000). The aim of this review is to discuss the current understanding of what is known about burglary in terms of target selection and how burglaries are conducted once inside

a property in order to understand the decision-making process of people who commit burglaries and how this may be used to prevent and reduce the rate of burglaries. Finally, we provide suggestions regarding the next steps that researchers should take to address some of the issues highlighted within the literature.

Outside the Home (Target Selection)

In a pioneering study, Bennett and Wright (1984) conducted interviews with burglars to investigate the key factors involved in identifying the ‘best’ target (i.e., houses) to burgle. The four factors found by Bennett and Wright were termed: occupancy, surveillability, accessibility, and security. Essentially, these factors provide information that can help an individual offend more efficiently (i.e., without being caught) and, thus, achieve their goal. These findings became the foundation for subsequent research investigating burglars’ target selection (Bennett & Wright, 1984; Logie, Wright, & Decker, 1992; Nee & Meenaghan, 2006). Several studies contrasted burglars with non-burglar comparison groups (i.e., police officers, students) and found that burglars were superior at recognising burglary-related cues (e.g., Logie, Wright, & Decker, 1992; Retamero, & Dhimi, 2009). These cues reflect the key factors noted by Bennett and Wright (1984), such as high hedges (surveillability), empty houses (occupancy), unlocked windows (accessibility), and CCTV (security). This line of research informed the notion that burglars develop a form of expertise through their repeated offending, and that even those who do not offend, but frequently work with burglary (e.g., police officers), become knowledgeable and evidence partial expertise (Logie, Wright, & Decker, 1992; Retamero, & Dhimi, 2009). In their conceptualisation of burglary expertise, Nee and Meenaghan (2006) proposed that repeat burglars develop a form of automatic recognition for ‘attractive houses’ and other burglary-relevant cues.

This research would suggest that hardening a target (i.e. increasing occupancy, surveillability, accessibility, and security) would deter individuals from burgling it, particularly those with an expertise in identifying these hardening factors. However, Clare (2011) found that expert burglars were less deterred by hardened targets (e.g., those with high security, low accessibility). Similarly, Bennett and Wright (1984) found that target hardening strategies only deter less experienced individuals. Despite these findings, there have been recent efforts to increase the security of properties using new technologies (e.g. video camera doorbells, security features on electronic devices). Thus, whilst preventative efforts may make it harder for people to burgle a property, expert burglars have learned to recognise that these strategies signal the potential presence of high value items (Taylor, 2017).

In summary, this research has highlighted that there are factors in a property that can be altered to reduce the chances of a burglary, unless conducted by expert burglars. There is the potential for burglars to become experts at their form of offending and this expertise helps guide their future offending behaviours. Since this expertise reduces the chance of being caught, future research needs to examine whether the development of expertise is a passive or active process, or a combination of both. The next section will examine whether expertise is shown inside the house during a burglary offence.

Inside the Home (Behavioural Patterns)

Recent research has focused on how burglary offences are conducted within a domestic property (e.g., Meenaghan et al., 2018). From conducting interviews with burglars, Nee and Meenaghan (2006) found that cash, jewellery, and personal documents were the most common items stolen. Additionally, most of the sample reported using a specific search pattern during their offences. First, the master bedroom was targeted, followed by other adult bedrooms. This

was followed by the living room, dining room, study, and kitchen. The master bedroom was the primary target due to burglars learning that it contains the most desirable items (e.g., cash, jewellery) (Nee & Meenaghan, 2006). Thus, by learning where to find the most valuable items, burglars learn to adjust their route through the house so that they gain a greater reward in a shorter time. As such, Nee and Meenaghan (2006) concluded that burglars also show expertise in terms of *how* they burgle a house.

Using a sample of men who had committed burglary, Meenaghan, Nee, van Gelder, Otte, and Vernham (2018) tested the theory of expertise using computer simulation technology. The simulation allowed participants to freely explore a virtual neighbourhood where they were asked to burgle a property. During the simulation, participants were asked to talk through the meaning of their actions. The results showed that burglars preferred valuable but small (i.e., carryable) items, such as jewellery, documents, cash, and electronics. Electronic items have risen in prominence over the last decade and have become more portable and more valuable. Despite the increased value of these electronic devices, they typically have advanced security features. Some burglars have come to recognise this risk and avoid taking certain devices (i.e. Apple devices). This implies an forensic awareness, which is a common factor in criminal expertise (Beauregard & Martineau, 2014), as well as burglary expertise (Nee & Meenaghan, 2006). This presents a dilemma for the burglar, in that, they can either take more valuable items but increase the risk of being caught, or they can take fewer valuable items but reduce the chances of being caught. During the simulation, many in the sample stated that electronics and other valuable items can typically be found in the bedroom. This further supports the idea that the route taken during a burglary is associated with more desired items, with the master bedroom being the best or most lucrative place to start (Meenaghan et al., 2018). As can be seen, using computer-simulated methodology has helped corroborate existing findings and uncover new information (Nee et al., 2019; Meenaghan et al., 2018). This includes the decision-

making processes that can occur during a burglary, which has provided new insights into burglars' beliefs and appraisal of their offending actions.

More recently, Nee et al. (2019) used a similar methodology to Meenaghan et al. (2018) but quantified the simulation data in order to compare three groups; (1) a burglar sample; (2) a non-burglary offender sample; and (3) a non-offender sample. Their aim was also to explore the theory of burglary expertise. They found that, compared to non-offenders, the burglar sample took less items overall and preferred items of less weight, as well as items with a smaller volume. These differences suggest that burglars have a different understanding of what considered 'valuable' within a property (Nee et al., 2019). Burglars also took less low and mid-value items in comparison to non-offenders. No differences were observed for the high-value items. There was also no difference in the time taken to burgle the house or the distance covered. Overall, this study suggests that, despite burglars and non-offenders spending the same amount of time in a property, it is the non-offenders who typically take more and, thus, have higher monetary gain. It could therefore be hypothesised that burglars know more about the reselling of low/mid value items, rendering such items less desirable; something that future studies need to test. Burglars also spent more time on the second floor than the first. This is interesting because the burglars and non-offenders took the same amount of high value items. This may suggest that the general public are able to identify the most valuable rooms and efficient routes despite never having burgled before, suggesting this expertise may not be strongly related to the route taken. To corroborate this, future research could analyse the time spent in each room to empirically ascertain whether expert burglars prefer certain rooms.

Overall, these studies have uncovered the behavioural sequence of burglary offences and suggest that learned (expert) knowledge may influence this sequence. However, it is not clear as to how the findings can be used to lower burglary rates. For example, it is noted that, if an offender shows expertise, they are likely to be more resistant to rehabilitative strategies

and, thus, remain at risk to reoffend (Clare, 2011). Despite the use of computer simulations as a research tool, much more needs to be done to fully understand the psychological and situational factors that influence this complex behavioural decision-making process.

The Next Steps

So far, the literature has focused on the cognitive biases that guide how burglars choose a target, a route, and which items to steal (Meenaghan et al., 2018; Nee & Meenaghan, 2006; Nee et al., 2019; Retamero, & Dhimi, 2009). Research on target selection has suggested that altering the environment may reduce the potential for burglaries, but only for those who are not considered expert burglars (e.g., Clare, 2011). Moreover, since burglary remains a prominent (often repeated) crime in the UK, environment altering appears to not be as impactful at reducing burglary rates as first expected. Arguably, efforts are needed to better rehabilitate people who burgle in order to reduce offence rates. The existing lines of research have not resulted in the development of relevant assessment and clinical tools needed for rehabilitative purposes. Thus, is it pertinent that future research begins to develop these tools. However, the theory of expertise does posit that significant challenges will be faced when working therapeutically with repeat burglars.

An expansion of the research perspective is now needed; one that involves investigating the factors that affect motivation, offence-supportive cognitions, and other factors related to the risk of committing a burglary. We suggest that existing research findings and theories on burglary should be knitted with other relevant psychological theories. Some steps have been taken in this regard. For example, Taylor (2017) applied the Good Lives Model (a strengths-based rehabilitative framework) to better understand individuals who burgle. This approach uncovered how and why burglary was being used to satisfy the core needs of burglars. Taylor's

findings suggest that burglary prevention via deterrence is not enough to reduce burglary rates, as the core needs (and their attainment) of people who burgle are not being directly addressed. How the offence is conducted to fulfil these core needs may be linked to the decision-making processes observed during a burglary. Thus, an integrative approach may be the way forward for researchers and clinicians.

As discussed, specific behavioural sequences are often seen in burglary offences. That is, burglars have shown a clear preference for the route they take whilst burgling a property. A deeper understanding of these preferential routes and behavioural decisions may be gained by investigating the role of cognition (e.g., beliefs, attitudes scripts). These offence-supportive cognitions are a key factor in understanding aetiology of offending behaviour. For example, drawing upon Script Theory (Schank & Abelson, 1977) - a social psychological theory regarding the representation of temporal behavioural patterns - Butler and Gannon (2015) proposed that firesetting is influenced by “offence scripts” that are, themselves, guided by offence-supportive beliefs and firesetting expertise. Drawing upon script theory in relation to burglary, Hockey and Honey (2013) found that burglars have greater knowledge of how an offence sequence unfolds in comparison to non-offenders. Thus, one promising route forward for researchers is to examine burglary scripts and their relationship with other relevant risk factors (i.e., core needs/motivations, burglary-supportive cognitions, empathy deficits, and burglary expertise). This would allow for a more in-depth psychological understanding of burglary (e.g., how cognition influences burglary offending behaviour), as well as help to further corroborate the theory of expertise.

Conclusion

The current literature has developed an insightful perspective on the psychology of burglary, whereby theories have the potential to reduce offence rates. Yet the efficacy of this research and thus, crime reduction schemes, are not as impactful as once thought. Outside a home, it is clear that burglars can identify the factors related to successfully breaking into a property and the potential value of items in that property. Inside a home, there are few differences between what burglars do and what 'novices' do. Most importantly, key offence-supportive cognitions regarding burglary have been ignored. If burglary-related risk factors are examined, especially in terms of how they influence offending behaviour, efforts could be made to develop evidence-based assessment measures and treatment strategies to help reduce burglary offending. With the rise of new research methodologies (e.g. Virtual Reality), exciting opportunities now exist to push this line of research forward and achieve these goals. Without the identification of burglary-related risk factors, meaningful clinical efforts cannot be made to help reduce burglary offending and recidivism.

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