

EXPERTISE, EMOTION AND SPECIALIZATION IN THE
DEVELOPMENT OF PERSISTENT BURGLARYAMY MEENAGHAN, CLAIRE NEE, JEAN-LOUIS VAN GELDER, ZARAH VERNHAM and
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This article describes a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted among 70 experienced residential burglars regarding the reasons for getting involved in and maintaining criminal behaviour. Themes emerging reflected an interaction between skill-development and affect, which played a key role in the initiation and continuation of burglary-related behaviour. Early participation in burglary seemed to be strongly influenced by the desire for excitement. Over time this diminished and was replaced by habitual engagement in burglary. With respect to the actual commission of offences, automatic decision-making appeared to be characteristic of the entire decision-chain, from initial thoughts to the commission of the burglary. Implications of the interaction between affect, cognition and expertise on diversification, specialization and desistance from crime are discussed.

Keywords: expertise, burglary, automaticity, emotion, specialization

The development of offence-related skills and expertise may play an important role in the commission of crimes such as burglary (Nee and Meenaghan 2006), identity theft (Vieraitis et al. 2015), street robbery (Topalli 2006), sexual offending (Bourke 2012), homicide (Brookman 2015) and firesetting (Butler and Gannon 2015). Expertise requires learning and concerted practice within a specified domain (Chi and Bassok 1989). Therefore an adequate amount of repetition of the offence is necessary, at least for certain periods of the criminal career (Nee and Ward 2015). Recent work focusing on achieving a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of offending behaviour (Nee et al. 2019; Van Gelder et al. 2013) have called for a more in-depth exploration of how cognition and emotion interact in both the initiation into crime and maintenance of offending behaviour.

The study presented here used the novel Virtual Enactment Method (VEM: Meenaghan et al. 2018) to elicit detailed, qualitative information about offence-related decision-making. Using VEM, participants complete a ‘virtual burglary’ while undertaking a think-aloud protocol. A semi-structured interview follows, to elaborate on the spontaneous verbalizations arising during the exercise, especially aspects of burglary-related behaviour and decision-making. The method helps us understand in a richer way how a burglary is undertaken (scoping the neighbourhood, choosing a target, entering

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and completing the burglary) and this will be explored elsewhere. In this article, we were interested in burglars' general reflections on their early involvement in burglary, as well as examining more closely the initial stages of the more proximal decisions to offend that culminate in an actual burglary. For instance: under what circumstances does the initial decision/desire¹ to carry out a burglary arise that leads to a completed burglary hours or days later. These important initial stages of decision-making have been neglected in the literature, with the focus having been more on scoping neighbourhoods and choosing targets, and we expected that re-enacting the offence would help trigger more reliable and valid memories of these periods than interview alone (Nee 2010). Prominent themes emerging from the data identified an interplay between the development of skills and expertise and the experience of emotional reward, with a consequent impact on the development of prolific offending and specialization in burglary. To provide context, below we summarize theory and research on the roles of expertise and emotion and their impact on the development of offending; and what this means for specialization in criminal behaviour.

Expertise in Offending

Repeated engagement in any one type of crime inevitably results in the development of skills and knowledge in the commission of that crime (expertise). Applying established models of expertise to offender decision-making can advance our understanding of how and why people offend and desist from crime, as well as for situational crime prevention and rehabilitation (Nee et al. 2019). In an analysis of four decades of research into residential burglary, Nee (2015) highlighted evidence demonstrating superior cognitive processing in experienced burglars compared to novices in the scoping of a neighbourhood, target selection and the search of a property. To explain this, she drew on literature from mainstream cognitive psychology to argue that experienced offenders may develop a level of expertise comparable to that seen in individuals experienced in other (normative) fields.

Key features of the expertise model from cognitive psychology across many domains of experience include the development of dense and interconnected cognitive schemas in long-term memory, automaticity, selective pre-conscious attention and heightened situational awareness of relevant environmental cues (Nee and Ward 2015). The authors adopt a cognitive, neuroscientific definition of consciousness (Nordgren et al. 2011), which infers a graded rather than dichotomous (on/off) depiction of awareness. The key features of expertise are also evidenced in the early interview-based research with burglars (e.g. Cromwell et al. 1991; Wright and Decker 1994), in experimental work (Bennett and Wright 1984; Logie et al. 1992; Nee and Taylor 2000), and recently using increasingly sophisticated simulation techniques with virtual reality (Meenaghan et al. 2018; Nee et al. 2015; 2019; Van Gelder et al. 2017). In comparison to householders, students, police officers and non-burglar offenders, burglars appear able to more efficiently navigate neighbourhoods, recognize and process a wider range of relevant target selection cues (e.g. those indicating access, occupancy, surveillability and wealth), enter the property and undertake the burglary.

¹We know from a wealth of research that burglaries rarely happen on the spur of the moment and are usually the result of a long chain of decisions (see Nee 2015 for a review).

The pre-conscious scanning of the environment and automatic nature of expert decision-making means that accurately assessing the underlying cognitive processes can be problematic, as they reside beneath the awareness of the actor once they have been practised many times. The use of virtual environments helps to address limitations of recall by effectively reinstating the context of the crime, and allowing for the re-enactment of the event, providing a means to observe behaviour that may not be subject to conscious awareness. It allows for the discussion of actions and emotions as they happen in response to visual cues rather than relying on memories of past events. In a series of studies, researchers working on the Virtual Burglary Project² have demonstrated that the use of virtual reality can be an effective tool in replicating real-life behaviour (Nee et al. 2015), eliciting emotional response (van Gelder et al. 2017), and identifying the indicators of expertise in experienced burglars compared to non-burglar offenders and matched non-offenders (Nee et al. 2019). Furthermore, Meenaghan et al. (2018) reported improved rapport and engagement, resulting in greater spontaneous and non-spontaneous (interview) disclosure of offence-related behaviour using the VEM. Here, we intend to capitalize on the triggering of memory scripts and schemas about burglaries during the recent re-enactment to explore with participants what happens in the days, weeks and hours before the burglary and what they felt motivated them to offend in the first place.

Motivation to Offend

The development of offence-related expertise may offer insight into why people begin and continue to offend, and do so within a specific domain. An interesting question would be how accruing expertise influences motivation. The salience of well-established influences on offending, such as financial gain (e.g. Bennett and Wright 1984; Cromwell et al. 1991; Nee and Taylor 1988), drug use (e.g. Bennett and Wright 1984) and the influence of others (Mullins and Wright 2003; Shover 1973; Wright and Decker 1994) vary across the criminal career, and it may be that expertise interacts alongside other factors in the decision to burgle. For example, expertise could reduce the need for the reliance on others in the commission of the offence, as developing skills enable the more experienced offender to complete a successful burglary alone thus increasing reward and reducing the risk of being 'grassed'. This is reflected in increased lone offending in older offenders (Carrington 2002; Meenaghan et al., in prep.; Piquero et al. 2007), further delineated by Hodgson and Costello (2006), who reported increased solo offending with both age and the progression of the criminal career. Additionally, cognitive scripts guiding target selection may reduce the need to share information about potential targets. Drug use as a facilitator for offending (increasing confidence and heightening senses; e.g. Cromwell et al. 1991; Hochstetler 2001) may reduce in importance as the skills (and related confidence in ability) associated with expertise increase—equally, however, a dependence on drugs may develop in this time. There is also growing support for the need to account for the influence of emotion on decisions to offend, and

²The Virtual Burglary Project is an ongoing collaboration between the University of Portsmouth (UK), the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law (Germany) and VU University (Netherlands). It aims to use virtual environments to understand offending behaviour, cognition and emotion in burglars.

the current research provides the opportunity to assess the interaction of expertise and affect on decision-making, from the perspective of the offenders themselves.

The Role of Emotion

Psychological motivations (e.g. excitement and revenge) have been identified as almost as important in the decision to burgle as monetary gain (Cornish and Clarke 2002; Cromwell et al. 1991; Wright and Decker 1994). The anticipation of the ‘good time’ that can be achieved through the proceeds of offending plays a key motivational role in burglary (Shover and Honaker 1992). Similar effects have been reported in other forms of acquisitive crime (e.g. shoplifting, Cromwell et al. 2003; street robbery, De Haan and Vos 2003). Van Gelderet al. (2013) propose that theories of criminal decision-making must take into account not only the prediction of financial gain in the cost analysis of traditional rational choice theories, but also emotions experienced prior to, and during decision-making. In addition to the impact of the immediate situation on decision-making, mood states unrelated to the criminogenic situation (affecting, for example, the assessment of risk) may also play an important role. As such, the experience of emotion and mood can serve as triggers for criminal motivation, but also influence the assessment of the environment and situation, perhaps resulting in more reckless behaviour (Van Gelder et al. 2009), or triggering expertise scripts and schemas (Nee and Vernham 2017).

Specialization and Diversification

Specialization in crime is often considered to be part of a wider, more versatile offending pattern (Piquero et al. 2003). A wealth of research suggests at least some level of specialization however (DeLisi et al. 2011; Jennings et al. 2014), particularly for property offenders as they get older (Armstrong 2008; Nieuwbeerta et al. 2011). The development of expertise may provide an explanation for this observed specialization, as it enables a more successful, less risky, and more lucrative crime. Inevitably, lower risk crimes with high financial reward are more likely to be repeated (in line with Rational Choice Theory, Cornish and Clarke 1986), therefore expertise may increase the potential for burglary to be chosen over both alternative crime options and non-offending paths. The current study aims to investigate the impact of expertise on specialization, whilst factoring in the influence that emotional state (both immediate and anticipated) has on the decision-making processes.

The Present Study

Interviews with experienced burglars (aged 18–61 years) were used to examine reasons for getting into crime (distal influences) and for undertaking recent crimes (proximal influences), to understand in a more detailed way the nature of these decisions. The range in age of participants interviewed enabled investigation of these influences at different stages of the criminal career. Additionally, we sought to identify indicators of

expertise, developed over time and with experience, and investigated their potential impact on specialization or otherwise in crime type.

Method

Participants

Data were collected as part of a larger, mixed methods programme of research (The Virtual Burglary Project). In total, interviews from 70 respondents were analysed: $n = 33$ from adult prisons (>21 years, $M_{\text{age}} = 39$, S.D. 9.93); $n = 37$ from Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) (18–21 years, $M_{\text{age}} = 20$, S.D. 1.43). Category ‘B’ and ‘C’ adult prisons were purposively targeted for the recruitment of adult samples, as these are where those sentenced for burglary are typically held.³ In accordance with conditions set by Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), participants were required to have previous or current convictions for burglary. Members of prison staff identified potential participants (those with relevant convictions), and these were invited to participate. Previous research (e.g. Bennett and Wright 1984; Nee and Meenaghan 2006; Wright and Decker 1994) suggests that the use of official offence history may not be the most reliable indicator of experience in burglary, as many experienced burglars do not have extensive convictions for burglary. Accordingly, participants’ experience of burglary was also assessed through spontaneous verbalizations during the simulation, and in a semi-structured interview after completion of the virtual burglary. Estimated total lifetime burglaries (or descriptions of numerous, regular burglaries over an extended period) and quality and quantity of knowledge about burglary (in line with skills and knowledge identified in previous samples examining decision-making in burglars, e.g. Clare 2011; Cromwell et al. 1991; Nee and Taylor 2000; Wright and Decker 1994) were considered. Inclusion in analysis depended on agreement from three members of the research team regarding level of experience using these criteria. This ensured the exclusion of participants who had embarked on only a small number of burglaries for which they had been caught ($n = 16$), and that those who were included had gained sufficient ‘successful’ experience to have had the opportunity to develop skills through experience. The final sample was predominantly white British (73%), with 8% identifying as black British, 7% black African or black Caribbean, and 3% Asian British. The remainder of the sample were white European (3%) or Gypsy (6%). It is important to note that, while not explicitly recorded in this study, it was assumed that participants came from backgrounds typical of acquisitive offenders in terms of socio-economic disadvantage and substance misuse, as has been well-documented (e.g. Nee and Ioannou 2018).

Procedure

Ethical approval was gained through the Science Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the first authors’ University. Approval for the research to be conducted in HMP/YOIs was obtained through the HMPPS in the UK. Consenting prison governors assigned a member of staff to identify potential participants and distribute information sheets to

³UK (male) prisoners are categorised according to risk of escape, harm to the public, and threat to the control and security of the prison, thus prisons are organized into four categories ranging from A (high security) to D (open prison).

those eligible for participation (those with convictions for burglary). Those interested in taking part were invited to meet the researcher to discuss the research and ask any questions prior to consenting to take part. Information sheets were read out loud, to avoid any issues with embarrassment over literacy issues, and anonymity of data was assured. Consent forms were stored separately from interview and simulation data. All consenting participants completed data collection regardless of the level of experience. Those without sufficient experience were later excluded from analysis. Data were recorded using digital voice recording devices, consent for which was gained prior to interview.

After gaining demographic data (age, education, and involvement in legitimate work), participants were instructed on the use of the simulated environment (a 'virtual' neighbourhood, from which they were required to select one property, and to 'burgle' that property), and asked to 'think aloud' as they completed the task. The virtual burglary task was followed by the semi-structured interview, which lasted approximately 45 min. Careful consideration was given regarding whether to discuss the burglary according to temporal ordering (early decision through to completing of the offence). However, in order to maximize on the reported benefits of increased rapport, enhanced disclosure and triggering of burglary-related mental scripts and schemas using the VEM (Meenaghan et al. 2018), it was decided to ask participants to complete the burglary task before exploring other aspects. The first six interviews were monitored to make sure this was not impacting negatively on the interview process. Accordingly, participants were first asked to elaborate on any pertinent issues arising as part of the 'think aloud' process during the actual burglary, followed by questions regarding the period immediately after the burglary (exiting the scene, conversion of goods), leading to the hours subsequent to this (the remainder of the day/night). They were then asked about: the days and hours before the burglary (and the proximal decisions leading to actually going out and commit a burglary(ies) in the coming period); finally to 'go right back to the beginning', where they were asked about the initial decision to offend and the processes that led to them being involved in residential burglary in the first place. The interview process was, however, flexible, allowing the interviewer to respond to and ask questions as they naturally arose as part of this process.

Analysis

Analysis of the data followed a thematic approach, a qualitative method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) in data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible and, in the current research, inductive method, following the procedure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). NVIVO software was used to facilitate coding. The analysis consisted of six steps. First, the interview data were transcribed, read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the content. Second, codes (features of the data that appear interesting to the researcher) were generated. Third, these codes were reviewed and grouped together in 'themes'. Fourth, themes were then reviewed and refined—some were discarded and others were further grouped together. Fifth, the themes were defined and named. Finally, specific data items were selected to illustrate the themes and relate them to previous literature.

The analysis revealed four overarching phases/themes associated with the decision to offend: *initiation into crime*, *progression onto prolific burglary*, *the proximal decision to burgle*, and *the commission of the offence*. Sub-themes were identified relating to the *impact of emotional reward*, *diversification and specialization*, and *the influence of expertise*. Patterns in the data were organized and the themes and sub-themes were used to communicate shared experience in the study population regarding distal and proximal reasons for committing burglary. The analytical themes and sub-themes were finally examined to draw conclusions from the data, which reflected the burglars' perception of the development of prolific offending and their involvement in residential burglary.

Results and Discussion

The interviews facilitated discussion of general motivations to offend and the development of the criminal career. These discussions suggested interrelated, though somewhat distinct phases in the decision-making resulting in offending behaviour. The analysis below considers the distal reasons for offending before moving onto the proximal reasons for committing burglary, also discussing the impact on specialization and diversification in offending. Sub-themes relating to the influence of affect and expertise on the decision to offend, and the development of habitual burglary behaviour and decision-making are discussed throughout.

Initial discussion of very early involvement in crime reflected previous research (for example [Piquero et al. 2007](#)) in relation to the relatively young age of first criminal activity ($M = 12.92$, $S.D. = 4.29$). Living in a criminogenic neighbourhood alongside offending peers played a major role in early involvement in crime:

Like where I'm from... that's what it's like, it's crime, like, that's the norm. PPT009 (Young burglar—YB)

I was just born on the streets... that's what people do [...] everyone was doing the same thing. PPT052 (Adult burglar—AB)

This was the case for the younger and older offenders alike. Their descriptions were more reflective of a drift into crime rather than a distinct turning point, serving to highlight the extent to which, even at this early stage, offending was considered an integral and almost inevitable part of participants' lifestyles. This also points towards a level of automaticity in the distal decision to offend. For younger offenders, it may be that this automaticity arose from 'a feeling of being swept along by events' ([Youngs and Canter 2012](#); p. 236), with other (older) accomplices taking responsibility for making decisions and guiding behaviour, requiring little skill on the part of the young burglar:

When someone comes up with you, like "fuck it, shall we go out?", I'd be like, yeah, I'm a whatever type of a guy... a go with the flow type of guy. I don't come up with the ideas, I'm just there. PPT037 (YB)

There is some evidence to suggest that those who offend with more experienced burglars in the early stages of their career may engage in burglary for longer than those who initiate with other novices ([Hodgson and Costello 2006](#)), raising the question of whether shared expertise (reducing the need for learning 'on the job', which inevitably may result in costly failures) impacts on ongoing burglary behaviour. The older participants

tended to assign more personal control when reflecting on their early offending, and their ongoing involvement in burglary. Only the older burglars described themselves as ‘professionals’ in their field, indicating the role that the development of expertise may play in the narratives that promote ongoing participation in burglary.

Progression into prolific burglary

The impact of emotional reward

Having completed one burglary, a key factor that seemed to lead to further involvement was the experience of making quick, easy money. The description of one young burglar demonstrates this, but also serves to highlight the additional bonus of positive emotion and excitement:

I licked my first one with my co-d [co-defendant] and I just had so much money and I was thinking, wow, is this what 10 minutes of work is... and I ain't gonna lie, I'll say I fell in love with it, in the car, I'm thinking, bruv, like, half an hour's work and I got six grand to split two ways, like, wow, like WOW, like.... PPT037 (YB)

That financial gain plays an important role in continued involvement in acquisitive crime is well-documented, and it is historically assumed to be a major motivation for this type of offending (e.g. [Bennett and Wright 1984](#); [Cromwell et al. 1991](#); [Scarr 1973](#)). However, the younger burglars' quotes were also replete with examples of excitement associated with continuing to offend in this way:

I think from then, it was a natural kind of thing, I loved the thrill of it. PPT013 (YB)

In addition to the experience of positive affect (excitement) in the commission of the offence, participants described a (positive) change in mood resulting from obtaining money:

I guess a bit of it was to feel good, having money in your hand. There's nothing worse than walking up the street having no money in your pocket, looking at a shop thinking I'll get myself a drink, but you can't do it, it's a bit downing. When you walk up and think, ah, I've got a grand in my pocket in cash, it's like... feels good. PPT014 (YB)

Early qualitative literature has pointed toward such affect-laden reasoning, if not as a primary motivator, then as a secondary one in acquisitive offending. Excitement, thrill and increased status have been linked to car theft ([Light et al. 1993](#)) and the release of tension and emotion with street robbery ([De Haan and Vos 2003](#)). Recent developments in affective neuroscience have illuminated the inextricable link between cognition, emotion, brain and body and how this drives human behaviour (e.g. [Pessoa 2018](#)). Cognition and emotion are seen as the same process in what [Maiese \(2011\)](#) calls the ‘evaluative framing’ that occurs using emotion-based memory whenever we make a decision. The reflections of burglars in the current sample provide support for this view and for [Van Gelder et al.'s \(2013\)](#) perspective, that underestimating the impact of affect on offender decision-making limits the scope of offender decision-making models. It is acknowledged that few researchers now subscribe to a theory of full rationality ([Bernasco, Van Gelder and Elffers 2017](#); [Nee et al. 2019](#)) and that even the original authors, [Cornish and Clarke \(1986\)](#) propose a notion of ‘bounded’ rationality in which

cost-benefit analyses are flawed and prone to error and bias and in which ‘satisfactory’ decisions are more likely than ‘optimal’ ones (Kahneman et al. 1982; Simon 1957).

While emotional gains (e.g. excitement, thrill) may be accounted for in a similar way to financial gains in the (rational) decision to offend, participants in the current sample implicated the strength of emotion experienced (‘falling in love with burglary’) in the process of engaging in crime more frequently and consequently in a more habitual, automatic manner (‘a natural kind of thing’). This suggests that affect, combined with aspects of expertise, may together play a potent role in the automaticity that promotes ongoing engagement in burglary.

Looking in more detail at the points at which affect are experienced, high levels of excitement and adrenaline were important in the decision to re-offend after early burglary experience, and the experience of nervousness, excitement or an adrenaline rush while actually breaking into the property continued to some extent throughout the criminal career for most participants:

Once you’re in there, it’s just happening like... it is a bit of an adrenaline rush as well, you’re in there, your hearts pumping, you know what I mean. PPT009 (YB)

It’s like when you get to the back door, ‘ah, is it open?’ Then you start pumping with adrenaline coz you’re going in. PPT029 (AB)

A downgrading of both the experience and importance of the adrenaline rush as expertise accrued was reported by both (more experienced) younger and older burglars. With consistent practice this (probable) habituation occurred at a relatively early age:

At first, a lot of adrenaline, excitement, but then I kind of got used to it, so it was just normal. PPT047 (YB)

Years ago I used to think that it was a bit of a buzz... but now it’s not really, I don’t really get anything out of it, I just do it for the money...It’s just become habit, to be honest. PPT045 (AB)

It was common for participants to conclude their descriptions by alluding to the ‘normality’ and ‘habitual’ nature of their later involvement in burglary, supporting the relationship between the experience of affect and the development of automaticity:

‘First times everybody gets nervous with anything, but then the more you do it, the more you get comfortable with your work... A normal thing then’. PPT035 (YB)

‘As I started doing more of them, it got more into it... Half the time I wouldn’t even realise I’m thinking about it, but I’m looking at a house, you know what I mean, just natural now... when I’m walking down somewhere, it just kind of clicks, I can control it sometimes, just not all the time’. PPT046 (YB)

A pattern emerges of initiation into burglary linked originally to the desire for excitement, and the ‘thrill’ of the offence. This thrill reduces over time and with exposure to burglary, an affect anticipated according to the theories of habituation. Such reduction in response with increased exposure has been demonstrated for both pleasurable stimuli (e.g. Leventhalet al. 2007) and for stressors (e.g. Grissom and Bhatnagar 2009), both of which are likely present in the undertaking of a burglary. Repeated engagement, motivated initially by emotional reward, results in increasing skill and automaticity, leading to habitual offending. Thus, participation in burglary continues beyond the point where excitement is a key determinant in the decision to offend, with financial reward becoming a more powerful (cognitive and affective) driver. During

this process, expertise likely leads to a more stable cost-benefit trade-off regarding continuation and proliferation of crime.

The findings above have important implications for recent cognitive theories of offending (Nee and Ward 2015) with regard to the role that expertise plays, but also highlight the influence of affect as part of the decision-making process. The following section considers how expertise and affect impact on specialization and diversification in crime.

Specialization vs diversification

All of the participants in the current research had considerable experience in committing residential burglary. The benefit of this experience came in various forms. First, regular involvement in burglary had the potential to elevate the offenders' status and consolidate their sense of belonging within the peer group. The quote below demonstrates how this might also equate to a shift in perception to a more 'professional' role:

As soon as I got kicked out of school I started doing crime... all these popular kids started to try to talk to me... I got involved in a bigger circle of friends, olders and such like... I sort of looked up to them. I worked my way up, and all these people I looked up to, they're like coming to me for help... so I felt like their boss sort of thing. PPT009 (YB)

Secondly, and in line with previous research on expertise in offending (Clare 2011; Nee 2015), experience led to the development of skills that allowed the targeting of more ambitious, and more rewarding burglaries:

That's where it first started 'til we built up our confidence a bit more. Got to know the game a bit more and how to do it better. PPT012 (YB)

As you get older it comes more, your targets get more... your targets get more established and more wealthier. PPT045 (AB)

Older burglars were more likely to say they had progressed onto other types of crime, although this was not reflected in the current convictions ($n = 21$ were currently serving a sentence for burglary). They did have a more diverse range of current convictions (violent offences, aggravated burglary, armed robbery, arson, commercial burglary, possession and supplying drugs) compared to the younger offenders (violent offences, robbery, possession of drugs and sexual offences), supporting the theory that any specialization is part of a wider, more diverse criminal career (DeLisi et al. 2011).

The commercial route's a lot easier... they don't really care, like businesses, they don't care. Fair enough you're getting it, but they're getting it back. When you go to houses, you start getting people putting photos up on Facebook, coz you could be getting seen on CCTV... do you know this person... I'd rather go down commercial sites to be honest. PPT027 (AB)

Older participants who continued to specialize in burglary provided two distinct reasoning processes for this decision. Firstly, some felt they had no other choice in satisfying their financial needs:

... Burglary's the only thing that you're gonna get money, you're gonna get cash PPT029

While others, in accordance with Youngs and Canter's (2012) 'professional' narrative role, felt they had developed some level of skill and mastery, considering burglary to be their chosen 'career':

But if I was to say, without being nonchalant, to say my profession, as a criminal I am a burglar... It's a job... my job was to go and do this, get here and get out and gone. Once I'm on my way I don't think backward, never. It's a job, it becomes a job. PPT028

The description of burglary as a 'job' provides further evidence of its routine, habitual nature, and inevitability of the proximal decision to offend. This latter group were notable in their desire to portray an image of being part of a 'better class' of burglar, capable of targeting more secure, more dangerous and more lucrative burglaries:

And to be invisible means you gotta be professional, and to be professional means that you gotta know what you are doing, but you gotta understand the minute you put the word professional to you being a burglar, your [prison] sentences have just gone up to 5 [years] and over. PPT028

They considered themselves more able to avoid detection than the average burglar, and framed evidence to the contrary (a current conviction for burglary) as a justifiable risk in relation to the number of burglaries for which they had evaded arrest, and the profit they had made through these successful burglaries. Brezina and Topalli (2012) showed that the experience of arrest, conviction and prison can actually raise an offenders' assessment of their criminal prowess—it enabled them to refine their methods and become more effective in the future. The current sample indicated that the possibility of being caught is ever present, but increased skill, through learning from (both positive and negative) experience reduced the risk to a level considered acceptable in light of the potential gains available:

Say you do get away with it, you get caught, like say a couple of hours later, you don't care coz it's been a worth it day, I'm going to do... 16 months in jail, I've just earned myself 10 grand...It's highly unlikely you do one burglary you're gonna get caught. PPT053 (YB)

Interestingly, a level of perceived professionalism was often accompanied by a shift in the reported motivations to offend. Those participants portraying the 'professional' role suggested that their motivations for burglary were more morally grounded, often for the benefit of others—participant 028 described his 'job' as '*Robin-Hooding*⁴', and he gave a number of examples of how his financial gains had been used to better the lives of his family and friends:

I knew my friend's son had just been accepted to photography college, and he needed all the best stuff... it was a camera, to me that's a couple of hundred quid, bang, but when I thought about it I thought, hold on, I wonder if this would help him, so I rung him up and I said [...] is this any good to him? He went, 'oh God, yeah that would help him right out', and I said, well it's a present from me, but, if he fails his course and everything, I'm gonna be pissed off, this is to help him. It's not wrong, well it's not right, but it's not wrong, he's now a proper photographer, and he always says it was because of you [...] I dunno, I know it sounds a bit horrible to take from one to give to another, but, Robin Hooding... PPT028 (AB)

⁴A reference to Robin Hood, a heroic outlaw in English folklore, famed for robbing from the rich to give to the poor.

These perspectives point toward two possible ways in which the development of offence-related skills (and expertise) led to continued specialization in burglary in the older (and more experienced younger) offenders. In the first, burglary was framed in a negative light in which specific offence-related skills limited the individual to continued burglary behaviour as he had few available alternatives. This was often accompanied by accounts of having experienced little opportunity in life, and of actions being ruled by an expensive drug habit:

The withdrawals, and even the thought of withdrawals, like, supersedes anything that I've told myself before that, you know, and that's generally the pattern. PPT030 (AB)

The second portrayed the development of the same set of skills in a far more positive light, elevating the individual to a higher level of 'professional' burglar, justifying continued involvement through superior abilities and motivations:

But the legitimate options, it's not worth my time... the money you end up paying me, I'll make that in an hour after what you'd end up paying me in a week or a month like. PPT007 (YB)

Accordingly, those individuals who had continued burgling into adulthood appeared to either have proliferated the 'victim of circumstance' role apparent in the younger burglars, or adopted a role of far greater agency in relation to their offending. In both cases, expertise played a key role in specialization in burglary, however the way that expertise is used to frame the role of 'burglar' may have an impact on the salience of this role for the individual, with implications for specialization and diversification. The 'professional burglar' role may, e.g., require a greater investment, and therefore be more stable than that of those engaging due to perceived lack of options (who presumably would reduce their involvement when presented with alternatives, or as a result of changes in motivating factors such as drug use). Alternatively, the self-efficacy that accompanies the role of burglary as a choice may open up the individual to considering different, riskier and potentially more rewarding crime.

Participants who did not identify as 'current' burglars commonly reported that they had 'grown out' of burglary, progressing onto more lucrative crime (aggravated burglary, targeting drug dealer's properties, commercial burglary and selling drugs). In some cases, this was related to increased experience, indicating that offence-related skills associated with expertise in burglary may be transferrable to other forms of crime:

I stopped doing burglaries when I was about 17. Just getting older. Moved onto a different league of game, I suppose, it was not worth the money, the risk, the time. I can do better things, better money, less... risky for me to get caught. PPT035 (YB, current conviction for aggravated burglary⁵)

However, offence-related expertise appears to be more related to specialization than diversification, at least in the short term for younger offenders, but also in relation to the skills that developed that allow older burglars to justify continued involvement in this type of offending, supporting recent work in this area (Armstrong 2008; DeLisi 2011).

⁵PPT035 had a current conviction for aggravated burglary, however throughout the interview he insisted burglary had been an activity confined to his youth. His current conviction involved targeting the property of a drug dealer.

Proximal decision to burgle

The commission of a burglary requires not only that it is part of the offenders' repertoire, but also that a decision is made to offend, and to choose burglary over other crime on a specific occasion. Interestingly, participants found it difficult to pinpoint definite decisions to burgle hours or days prior to the crime, describing it more as part of the flow of routine, daily activities:

It's what I'm gonna be doing, innit? PPT003 (YB)

For many burglary was '*something that you do every day*' (PPT041), again reflecting the automaticity and habitual decision-making of the experienced burglar:

It's sort of like, built in if you know what I mean, it's what we do. [...] people like... go out to the pub on a Friday night, we'd go out on the rob. PPT001 (YB)

For some, burglary became so routine that it overcame their logical reasoning to stop their involvement:

I got a suspended sentence and I was like, sweet, I'm not doing no more, for some reason I still... coz it was still such a part of me, yeah I still went out on the rob anyway. I went to court again in the morning, and by that afternoon I was in jail. PPT001 (YB)

And for others, identifying a specific reason for burglary appeared difficult:

I don't even know what I wanted the money for, I was going out, doing all these burglaries and that, and I wasn't actually sure what I wanted the money for. PPT001 (YB)

I had money but I just still used to rob houses, like. I already had cash in my pocket...coz you know when you do all these robberies and shit you live a high maintenance lifestyle. Even if I have cash I want more, like kind of greedy like. PPT037 (YB)

It appears, then, that habitual processes guide the decision-making of burglars early on in their career and even at the beginning of the decision chain. For the younger burglars particularly, no specific financial motivation (e.g. a drug addiction) was identified, however funding an expensive lifestyle was a common motivator. This suggests the primary motivation for burglary has changed little since the early samples of, e.g., [Wright and Decker \(1994\)](#), and the 'life as a party', as described by [Shover \(1996\)](#). As the career develops, financial gain became a more salient motivation, aligning with the comparison of burglary as a job, or a profession. By extension, this made burglary part of the older offenders' lifestyle and not subject to extensive deliberation anymore:

It's always been money oriented to tell you the truth... I dunno, it's really strange because as I said, it was like, my profession, it was my choice. PPT028 (AB)

Despite admitting to daily cannabis and frequent cocaine use, the younger burglars maintained this was not habitual, it was just part of their lifestyle. While this may reflect an unwillingness to admit to (or a lack of awareness of) an addiction, only four of the younger participants implicated drug use as driving their decision to offend (the remainder suggested they could afford their use through other means). Ten older offenders, in contrast identified drug use as a primary motivation, and it was only older offenders who admitted using heroin and crack cocaine ($n = 6$). Even for these participants, regular burglary came before addiction to drugs:

Well, probably about a third of the way in probably, and you're run by the drugs instead of you, you need something in you. Normally crack, heroin, Valium, I used to be on big Valium scripts.... PPT052 (AB)

Associations between drug use and crime are well documented, and despite conflicting perspectives on the strength of these associations and the direction of causality, a pervasive link between the two has been demonstrated across drug and crime types (see [Casey 2015](#)). The findings of the current research suggest that for these participants, regular drug use and repeated engagement in burglary developed and escalated alongside each other, with both becoming habitual to varying levels in individual participants.

The commission of the offence

When describing the process of target selection, and in line with previous research (e.g. [Logie et al. 1992](#); [Nee et al. 2015](#); [2019](#); [Wright and Decker 1994](#)), participants indicated a level of automaticity in the cognitive processes employed. All participants found it hard to pinpoint exactly what they look for in assessing a property for wealth and opportunity, relying on a 'gut instinct', as mentioned above. In line with Klein's work on expertise in another domain ([Klein 2009](#); [Klein et al. 2010](#)), what lay people commonly call gut instinct or intuition can be explained by tacit, automatic retrieval of scripts from long-term memory. The following quote reflects this regarding target selection:

I don't know what it is, like, it sounds weird, but you just, kind of know, when you see the house you kind of know... I just el like that's the one. PPT037 (YB)

Similarly, participants said they did not have to think about where to go once inside the property:

Nah, it's just wherever my feet take me. PPT026 (YB)

I don't know what it is, I'm just confident innit, like, I just know what I'm doing like, I just go about, or I know, someone might hide things in there instead of there, like. PPT037 (YB)

The second quote shows increased confidence associated with experience, as noted in [Clare's \(2011\)](#) sample of experienced burglars, and this self-efficacy was clear in participants' accounts of their natural ability to assess the criminogenic situation. The concept of 'instinct' arose many times, influencing participants' perceptions of themselves as successful burglars:

Considering that I have been burgling for however many years, and been caught the minimalist amount of times, I... try to do work off my own gut instinct. PPT028 (AB)

[Nee and Ward \(2015\)](#) describe how this superior appraisal, recognition and enactment point towards the development of expertise in offenders. In addition to enabling more efficient and effective decision-making, and increasing the reward of burglary, expertise may also increase the individual's sense of agency and perception of their own abilities. Unconscious (i.e. not requiring explicit deliberation), and effective assessment of the environment was perceived to reflect a superior ability to see and feel things that others perhaps could not, and this was often described with pride. Anecdotes of times in which participants ignored their 'gut feeling' and were disturbed or apprehended were remarkably frequent. In general terms, a person's belief in their ability to

perform well in any given task influences the course of action they choose to pursue (Bandura 1997). Self-efficacy in conventional pursuits has been linked to desistance (Maruna 2004), however Brezina and Topalli (2012) argue that it may also be developed in relation to offending paths. Accordingly, expertise increases the individual's assessment of their offence related performance, and in turn their perception of their own competence and success. According to Brezina and Topalli (2012), this increases the offender's commitment to crime leading to a greater likelihood of persistence.

Strengths and limitations

The current research highlights the role that automaticity and habitual decision-making play in the key decisions to engage in, and potentially specialise in residential burglary, and the important role of affect in the early stages of the criminal career. It suggests that young burglars are motivated by a desire for excitement and the thrill of the crime, however over time the strength of this experience diminishes. Repeated involvement in burglary up to this point, however, results in habitual offending and an offence chain that appears below the full consciousness of the offender (like any practised behaviour). Financial gain replaces excitement as a primary motivator, and those continuing to satisfy this through burglary may do so either because they feel limited to this as their only option, or because they frame their gained skills and experience as 'professionalism'. This interpretation is subjective and others may be possible, but we believe the data indicates the importance of further research into the links between affect and cognition in the development of offending behaviour. An approach that considers such factors may be crucial in understanding and intervening with the motivation to burgle in the early stages of the career.

It is acknowledged that the use of an incarcerated sample with convictions for burglary may not be representative of (potentially more 'successful') active burglars (though the latter population also has its flaws as argued by Copes et al. (2015) and Nee et al. (2019)). Confidentiality and anonymity were assured prior to gaining consent to reduce concerns regarding disclosure of information. In addition, while participants did have convictions for burglary, all had significant experience of burglary, including extended periods where they had evaded arrest. The use of the VEM served to address concerns regarding the fallibility of memory associated with the recall of past events (prior to conviction), through reinstating the context of the crime, and facilitating discussion of a 'virtual' crime happening immediately prior to interview (see Meenaghan et al. 2018; Nee et al. 2019). However, it is noted that while the use of virtual reality may enable us to come much closer to observing offending behaviour in real time, there will still be variations in behaviour and decision-making in real life compared to a simulation. Additionally, while the VEM attempts to create a scenario prompting the natural responses of participants, we cannot be sure that their narratives were not clouded by a desire to present themselves and their actions in a positive light.

Linked to this, the data gathered did not reflect the impact of negative emotion that may result from, e.g., self-doubt or traumatic experiences occurring while committing an offence, or negative feelings while reflecting on their actions after the event. This is certainly an area for further investigation, particularly in relation to the transition between the experience of emotion and more habitual offending. It is also acknowledged

that, probably due to the focus of the study, relatively few participants spoke about the impact of adverse childhood experiences and hardships likely to be prevalent in this population (socio-economic disadvantage is well documented among acquisitive offenders, e.g. [Nee and Ioannou 2018](#)). Future research could explore these potential (perhaps more distal) drivers and the development of expertise and habitual offending more thoroughly, particularly in relation to adopting the role of ‘professional’ vs ‘victim of circumstance’ discussed above.

Finally, while the current methodology enabled identification of a number of important motivations for and mechanisms behind burglary, the qualitative rather than experimental approach reduces generalizability. Despite this, the findings provide invaluable insights that are not accessible through quantitative methods, therefore enriching existing experimental work and providing valuable knowledge for informing rehabilitation and understanding desistance.

Conclusions

The purpose of the current research was to analyse accounts of experienced residential burglars to identify issues around the distal and proximal reasons for involvement in burglary as experience accrues. Issues of particular interest that arose in the narratives of the participants were around: the impact of emotionality in the onset and embedding stages of developing skill; crime as an ongoing way of life, i.e. the lack of evidence of any deliberate decision-making about when or where the next crime would happen (especially evident in younger burglars); and the automaticity of the commission of the crime, even at the very initial stages of the decision-chain. Alongside this, insights were gained about specialization and diversification as the offender accrued experience over time.

The narratives present evidence that models of decision-making in acquisitive offenders, particularly those focussed on rehabilitation, would benefit greatly from incorporating factors related to our understanding of expertise ([Nee et al. 2019](#)) and the influence of affect alongside the rational consideration of the costs and benefits of offending ([van Gelder et al. 2015](#)). We have extended our understanding of the impact of expertise on offending through identifying a lack of deliberative thinking in the initial criminal decisions, i.e. stage one of the decision-chain, away from the eventual scene of the crime. Successful interventions with offenders must, therefore, take into account not only the complex interplay of cognition and emotion, but also address the ‘flow-like’ decision-making i.e. not only beneath consciousness, but may be triggered much in advance of the actual scene of the crime.

Affect appears to influence the decision to offend most strongly in the early stages of the criminal career, with habitual decision-making superseding this in importance as the desire for, and experience of, excitement and thrill diminishes (in line with theories of habituation). We suggest the experience of positive emotion (such as the adrenaline rush during the offence) goes hand-in-hand with the development of skill and sense of agency in fuelling more prolific crime and specialization in the early stages of the career. As the offender progresses into adulthood this develops into an ability to maintain emotional composure and evaluate the most successful outcome for the burglary. Alternatively, repeated engagement in burglary to the omission of other (legitimate

or otherwise) pursuits may lead to the individual perceiving little opportunity but to continue to burgle as their skills and expertise are limited to this path. Self-narratives, and ‘neutralization techniques’—used by individuals to enable them to violate social norms by removing moral obstacles (see Maruna 2004; Sykes and Matza 1957) play a vital role in the proliferation of offending. This can be observed in the stories told by participants regarding their early offending (i.e. the level of responsibility for initiation into crime). Similarly, the role that burglary plays in their current lives (the norm for younger offenders, and ‘professional’ vs ‘resigned’ for older offenders) may impact on the commitment to continued burglary behaviour. Ne and Vernham (2017) identify the value of incorporating our understanding of expertise into intervention (e.g. supporting the offender to learn more prosocial skills, replacing ‘dysfunctional’ skills with more functional ones). An understanding the relationship between affect and cognition at specific stages of the criminal career further affords the opportunity to develop a more nuanced approach, accounting for the complex interplay of conscious and unconscious decision-making, expertise and affect. Specifically, interventions targeted prior to key transition points (e.g. where the influence of affect diminishes) have the potential to prevent the transition into more habitual offending in adulthood.

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