



A little information goes a long way: Expertise and identity theft



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ABSTRACT

Experts have a way of seeing the world in ways that differ from novices. Research on offenders suggests that as they develop expertise in their chosen crimes they become better skilled at recognizing opportunities and evading detection. The bulk of research emphasizes the role of criminal experience on offenders' abilities to quickly assess situations and commit crimes at that moment but little has been done to examine how expertise influences crimes that cannot be committed on the spot. Our aim is to examine the importance of expertise on the commission of identity theft (a crime that requires time to commit). We highlight the roles of both legitimate and illegitimate experiences in developing skills to be successful. In addition, we show how expertise not only effects criminal event decisions but criminal involvement decisions (specifically persistence).

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1. Introduction

A fundamental question of criminology asks whether crime requires specialized skills or is simply a low skilled endeavor committed with little thought or planning. Answers to this question have important implications for both theory and prevention. On one side of the debate, scholars argue that the spontaneity surrounding crime evidences the fact that limited skills are required to be successful (see for example Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This argument highlights the fact that much crime seems to be unplanned and inspired primarily by opportunity. Those on the other side argue that quick decisions do not

necessarily indicate lack of forethought or skills. These scholars argue that with growing expertise, criminals (like all people) learn to assess situations and discern opportunities, which then permits them to act quickly. Thus, while the spontaneous nature of some criminal behavior appears to reflect a lack of foresight and planning, it may in fact be the result of rapid decision-making borne from in-depth knowledge. Decades of research on the role of expertise in decision making in other areas such as medicine, sports, computer programming, and aviation supports this claim that the better someone is at a given task the quicker they can respond (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Hoffman, 1996; Klein & Hoffman, 1993; Wheatley & Wegner, 2001).

As interest in the importance of criminal decision making and expertise has increased, a sizeable body of literature has developed that supports the claim that expert criminals “see” the world differently

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than do novice ones (Bourke, Ward, & Rose, 2012; Carroll & Weaver, 1986; Garcia-Retamero & Dhimi, 2009). Generally, this research suggests that experienced criminals can more easily recognize opportunities, assess and respond to risks, and remember features of an environment that are conducive (or unfavorable) to crime than can novices (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2006; Logie, Wright, & Decker, 1992; Moore, 1984; Nee & Meenaghan, 2006; Nee & Taylor, 2000; Weaver & Carroll, 1985; Wright & Decker, 1994).

Scholars have devised various innovative quasi-experimental designs to assess the role of experience in criminal decision making. One of the first examinations of the role of expertise in decision making was Logie et al.'s (1992) study of incarcerated burglars. The researchers found that offenders were more aware of cues (i.e., occupancy, security, access and relative wealth) favorable for burglary than were a control group of homeowners and police officers. Moreover, when compared to non-burglary offenders, burglars were more effective at recognizing burglary-related cues and changes in their surroundings, suggesting that their heightened level of awareness was the result of their expertise with burglary rather than a by-product of general offending (Logie et al., 1992). These findings imply that offenders' active learning experiences committing offenses (burglary in this case) are instrumental in their ability to identify opportunities and assess situations conducive to crime. Thus, the burglars studied by Logie et al. (1992) displayed a heightened awareness of situational cues and were able to respond more efficiently and effectively than non-burglars because they had developed the ability to "chunk" or group these cues in long term memory. Nee & Ward (2015) point out that, as people become experienced in a behavior (in this case burglary), they learn to recognize which cues are relevant to a successful outcome and which cues are not. Over time this knowledge develops into cognitive schema that allows the offender to respond automatically, thereby simplifying decision making. Further support for the use of expertise in decision making is that expert burglars described the search of a home in terms consistent with another key feature of expertise—automaticity (Nee & Meenaghan, 2006). Automaticity is the ability to perform a behavior without engaging in a step-by-step or conscious deliberation of each detail of the behavior (Wheatley & Wegner, 2001). Actions occur automatically in response to a situation or set of stimuli and while the behavior may appear to some to be spontaneous and devoid of premeditation, it is the result of learning, repetition, and practice (Wheatley & Wegner, 2001). For example, offenders classified as "alert opportunists" act on opportunities they see in their daily lives that are "too good to pass up" (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2006; Topalli & Wright, 2013). Such rapid decision making gives the impression that crime is serendipitous (Jacobs, 2010). Rather than acting on a premeditated or prolonged decision to commit crime, alert opportunists can easily recognize good opportunities for theft with relative ease, even when they are not directly looking for opportunities. These are often opportunities non-experts simply do not recognize.

Research on expertise also shows that to be successful and avoid detection by law enforcement, offenders need to keep an ongoing assessment of risks by developing a situational awareness of their environment. As offenders learn to "automatically attend to and prioritize meaningful cues" they increase their ability to recognize, encode, and store information that may be relevant to future decisions (Nee & Ward, 2015). As this information builds in their long term memory, experienced offenders develop the ability to instantly evaluate a situation for its potential rewards as well as risks. Although offenders face many risks, research indicates that experienced offenders develop a set of specialized skills designed to avoid detection from law enforcement (e.g., Cherbonneau & Copes, 2006; Holt, Blevins, & Kuhns, 2014; Jacobs, 1999; Jacques & Reynald, 2012; Wright & Decker, 1997). Theoretically, this branch of research is consistent with work on restrictive deterrence and examines the risk reduction and arrest avoidance strategies of offenders (Gallupe, Bouchard, & Caulkins, 2011; Jacobs, 1993, 1996; Jacques & Allen, 2014). A key idea from this research is that

offenders do not passively accept risk. For example, expert shoplifters use a range of techniques to reduce the risks associated with their crimes, including timing their thefts with employee breaks and shift changes, using disguises or false identification, and constructing elaborate stories to escape capture (Weaver & Carroll, 1985). In addition, whereas the presence of security is typically enough to dissuade novice shoplifters, the presence of security stimulates experts to find ways around the security (Carroll & Weaver, 1986). In contrast, novice shoplifters focus on specific aspects of their theft but fail to incorporate the aggregate amount of information that factors into professional shoplifters' decisions to steal.

Similarly, experienced drug dealers report using a number of observational skills (e.g., examining a buyer's physical appearance, listening for verbal clues, and testing customers by forcing drug use on the spot) to determine whether a potential buyer is an undercover officer (Jacobs, 1996). For the most part, experienced dealers believe that years of trafficking have given them the ability to distinguish undercover agents from "true dope fiends" (Jacobs, 1996, p. 293). Overall, research on restrictive deterrence suggests that offenders use experientially learned strategies to reduce their risks of formal detection. As offenders become more proficient in their particular crimes, they develop the ability to execute them automatically and thus become free to attend to cues that indicate risk. In essence, they become excellent at multi-tasking, i.e., carrying out their crimes while at the same time being alert to the risks.

2. Aims of article

The notion of expert decision making has been demonstrated in empirical studies on a variety of offender types including burglars, auto thieves, robbers, drug dealers and shoplifters to name a few. All support the claim that expert criminals enact their crimes differently than novice ones and these differences are largely due to their possession of experience driven cognitive, emotional, and behavioral competences. Although the literature on expertise in offending is growing, the majority of research focuses on street crimes. For the most part, offenders who commit street crimes do so relatively quickly; that is, they can recognize an opportunity, commit the offense, and escape detection within a matter of seconds or minutes. To date, little research has focused on the role expertise plays in crimes that require more time and planning to complete successfully.¹ This is important because aspects of expertise (e.g., automaticity, chunking, multi-tasking, and situational awareness) will likely differ based on how the crime is enacted. Additionally, the learning and experience that leads to expertise in street offending is almost solely based on the learning of, and prior experience with illegal behavior. Thus, the commission of successive criminal acts is necessary to become a better criminal. Such is not the case for many frauds, where experience in the legitimate work world provide both opportunities and know how.

In light of these limitations in the offender expertise research, our aim is to examine the role expertise plays in the commission of identity theft. The crime of identity theft differs from street crime in two important ways: (1) the time required to successfully complete identity theft, including the acquisition of information and the conversion of that information, is longer and (2) identity thieves learn their skills through prior experience in legitimate as well as illegitimate work. Through a qualitative content analysis of research on identity theft (and fraud more generally) we seek to pinpoint the broad skills they develop to be successful and relate them to more general expertise concepts. Doing so allows us to elaborate on the ways that expert identity thieves see the world differently than do novices. It also allows us to encourage further avenues of research on experience and decision-making.

¹ Exceptions include predatory sexual crimes where the time from decision to offend to enactment is more similar to frauds such as identity theft (Bourke et al., 2012).

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