



Expertise and child sex offenders



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ABSTRACT

Research conducted on criminal expertise contends that offenders obtain specialist knowledge and skills relevant to their domain, and that the successful execution of knowledge and skills is a function of learning and experience. Some child sexual offenders possess domain-relevant competencies such as in the selection and manipulation of victims, decision-making and problem-solving, and eluding detection; these competencies and areas of skill contribute to their sexual offending. In this paper, we first examine Ward's (1999) original application of the concept of expertise to sexual offenders and briefly overview his theory. Second, Bourke, Ward, and Rose's (2012) empirical investigation of Ward's theory with sexual offenders is reviewed and the resulting expertise model is described in detail. Third, theory and research on self-regulation patterns and modus operandi in child sexual offenders are reviewed and its links with expertise are highlighted. Finally, the practice implications of an expertise perspective are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Historically the notion of being an expert in a particular area has held positive connotations and denoted the possession of extreme talent and its associated cognitive competencies of superior judgment, speed of thinking, and enhanced memory functioning (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). Typically, the focus of research into expertise has been in the domains of socially acceptable activities such as chess, sport, academia,

and medicine rather than socially disvalued activities such as criminal behavior (Nee & Ward, 2015–in this issue). However, in recent years theorists and researchers have been interested in the application of theories and research methods to offender groups (Nee & Ward, 2015–in this issue). More specifically, the ability of some offenders to carefully plan and skillfully execute criminal actions has suggested that, to some degree at least, expertise is present. In the sexual offending area in particular, research into the offense process and the tactics offenders use to prepare and obtain access to victims points to the presence of complex knowledge structures and highly effective decision-making (Ward, 1999). It is reasonable to assume that adopting an expertise framework can clarify how some offenders manage to offend against

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multiple victims and/or over extended periods of time without being detected. The long-term nature and sophistication apparent in some types of sexual offending raise a number of pressing questions. Does this group possess knowledge and skills that other sexual offenders do not? If so, what skills and knowledge might be associated with “expert” child sexual offenders as opposed to “novices” or beginners?

Over the last thirty years, the area of child sexual abuse has been the focus of considerable theoretical work and empirical research in an attempt to better understand and subsequently reduce the incidence of child sexual abuse, and to effectively treat child sexual offenders. During this time much of the attention has been on the construction and development of explanatory theories, which focus on the identification of causal factors that contribute to the onset, development, and maintenance of sexual offending. Research has also started to concentrate on the offense and relapse process, in addition to the modus operandi of sexual offenders. Offense chain or relapse process models aim to describe the salient features of sexual offending, including cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and contextual factors which are subsequently explained by theory. In contrast, modus operandi research sets out to identify the specific tactics and behaviors used in the planning and commission of an offense. By attempting to understand the methods used by offenders and the extent of their crimes, researchers and clinicians strive to identify areas for prevention, intervention, evaluation, and the social integration of child sexual offenders.

Causal theories have attributed the onset and maintenance of sexual offending to a number of individual psychological deficits including low self-esteem, intimacy and empathy deficits, distorted beliefs, and deviant sexual preference (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006). These deficit models are popular, and used widely in treatment. Deficit models are also based on the underlying assumption that child sexual offenders struggle to meet their needs through prosocial means (e.g. through having positive relationships with other adults) and therefore rely on antisocial means to have their needs met. While the literature indicates that sexual offenders do have deficiencies in some aspects of their lives, and it is important to recognize how these deficiencies may contribute towards an individual's sexual offending, it is also useful to consider their areas of competency.

Some sexual offenders display domain-relevant competencies in the selection and manipulation of victims, offense related decision-making and problem-solving, and in eluding detection; these competencies and areas of skill contribute to their sexual offending (Ward, 1999). Ward (1999) introduced the notion of *expertise* with reference to that group of sexual offenders who demonstrate high levels of competency in their offending. In this context, the concept of expertise is about the manifestation and application of knowledge and skill that individuals accumulate over time and suggests that it is possible to distinguish more skilled or expert individuals from novices or less skilled individuals. Bourke, Ward, and Rose (2012) confirmed Ward's hypothesis concerning the variation in offense-related skills and knowledge of child sexual offenders, and found empirical support for the existence of a continuum in the skills and competency exhibited by child sexual offenders from novice through to expert (see Nee & Ward, 2015–in this issue, who also emphasize a continuum in relation to offender expertise).

In this paper, we first examine Ward's (1999) original application of the concept of expertise to sexual offenders and briefly overview his theory. Second, Bourke et al.'s (2012) empirical investigation of Ward's theory with child sexual offenders is reviewed and the resulting expertise model is described in detail. Third, theory and research on self-regulation patterns and modus operandi in child sexual offenders are reviewed and its links with expertise highlighted. Finally, the practice implications from an expertise perspective are discussed. Research into expertise in sexual offending is in its infancy and most of the published studies have focused on offense-related decision-making and tactics. In our view, this work has strong theoretical and empirical links to the concept of expertise, and in particular to Ward's early

theorizing on this topic. As the majority of research focuses on male sexual offenders, this group is the focus of the paper.

2. Expertise and child sexual offenders

Researchers have analyzed and defined expertise in varying ways, reflecting their particular area of study and theoretical orientation (e.g. see Chi, 2006; Ericsson, 2006). However, the common themes evident in these definitions include the possession of greater levels of skills, knowledge, and understanding that allow us to distinguish between experts and novices (Nee & Ward, 2015–in this issue). Researchers studying expertise are interested in understanding how experts are able to exhibit consistently high levels of performance and why they are more capable than non-experts. Expert performance is associated with a range of complex skills and physiological adaptations which are acquired over many years of intensive practice and instruction which, for example, have influenced the way in which experts structure and organize their knowledge (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ward, 1999). It has been suggested that expert performance is not due to the possession of inheritable talent, although personality characteristics may influence the acquisition of complex skills (e.g. Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson, 2006). Expertise is associated with performance at a high level in context-bound or domain-specific areas and, therefore, may not necessarily generalize to other settings or domains (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Perkins & Salomon, 1989). The label of “expert”, in this context, is therefore associated with a person who has superior skill and the ability to perform consistently at exceptionally high levels in a particular domain such as chess, medicine, or music. In the area of offending this concept of expertise has been applied to a range of offenders including burglars (e.g. Nee & Meenaghan, 2006; Wright & Decker, 1994) and sexual offenders (Bourke et al., 2012; Ward, 1999).

In the first paper to discuss expertise and sexual offending, Ward (1999) proposed that child sexual offenders who have multiple victims over an extended period of time, especially preferential child sexual offenders, possess offense relevant knowledge and skills which may be qualitatively different from later onset child sexual offenders with relatively few victims. Ward suggested that by looking for competency or expertise in individuals' offense related behaviors (e.g. in their ability to effectively control children), it may be possible to identify factors which would be helpful in formulating a more accurate risk assessment and, ultimately, this may inform the treatment approach. From an expertise perspective, Ward hypothesized that offenders' experiences during a particular offense episode are processed according to existing implicit schemas, and what is learned during these offenses may result in changes to knowledge structures and their associated offense-related strategies.

Specifically, Ward (1999) theorized that knowledge is structured around behavioral scripts (offense scripts), which assist with the automatic processing of information and associated offense related decision-making. Information offenders hold about past victims and offenses may be stored as interconnected cognitive scripts, which are readily available and facilitate strategy selection for any current offense planning and execution. Offense scripts include instructions about how to perform certain actions, stipulate in what order they should occur, and also contain information about the likely outcomes of a particular action. For example, offense scripts may contain information regarding how to select and groom victims, how to plan and carry out an offense, how to ensure victim compliance, and what to do in the face of resistance, including how to avoid being detected. According to Ward, the ability of some offenders to avoid detection over many years, with numerous victims, is most likely the result of the refining of their offense related skills, such as precautions taken within offenses (e.g. location and victim choice), deceiving people close to them, as well as their capacity to regulate their emotional state, and thereby giving the appearance of leading a seemingly normal life. The capacity to identify these mechanisms could assist us in better understanding child sexual

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