



# Understanding expertise in burglars: From pre-conscious scanning to action and beyond



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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to review empirical research on residential burglary over the last three to four decades and relate these findings to a model of 'dysfunctional expertise' (Nee & Ward, this issue) that is rooted in mainstream cognitive psychology. It begins with a description of the elements of expertise that might fit in to this model and then traces the offender's decision-chain, using the model as an explanatory tool. Studies have shed light on: the automatic and habitual appraisal of the criminogenic environment during the daily, routine activities of the burglar and his journey to crime; accruing situational awareness and automatic recognition of cues signifying vulnerable properties during target selection; and speedy deployment of offending scripts based on tried and tested methods when entering and carrying out the crime. The review highlights how little is known about decisions, reflections and emotions after the crime. Aspects of the model that require development through further research, as well as the value of using the model for crime prevention purposes, are discussed.

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### 1. Aims of this article

The aim of this article is to gain a greater understanding of the specific cognitive processes that drive the development of expertise in this type of offending behavior in the days and hours surrounding the crime. Although residential burglary rates have fallen by about a quarter

internationally in the last decade (Tseloni, Mailley, Farrell & Tilley, 2010) it is still clearly a prevalent, costly and destructive crime (e.g. 700,000 incidents a year in the UK (Crime Survey of England & Wales (CSEW), 2013) and more than 3.7 million incidents per year in the U.S. (Truman, Langton & Planty, 2013)). Burglary is usually the crime that the general public worries most about (Bullock, Chowdhury & Hollings, 2009; Warr, 2000) because it is perceived as a relatively frequent crime and victims of burglary can suffer similar levels of trauma and distress as victims of robbery and assault (Lurigio, 1987).

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Further, the clearance rate for reported burglary is generally very poor (e.g. around 13% in the US (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009) and 17% in England & Wales (Smith, Talyor & Elkin, 2013)) indicating that many offenders remain active and at large in the community, some perhaps with greater proficiency than others. Much is still to be known then, about the thought processes and behavior that drive this crime and about ways to prevent it. This article will review what we have learnt about the goals, decision-making, skills and behavior of the burglar through observation, interview and experiments with the offenders themselves over more than three decades of research. Throughout the article, findings will be related to the model of 'dysfunctional expertise' outlined in Nee & Ward (2015–this issue) in an attempt to strengthen our conceptualization of the issues, providing a basis for moving forward towards more effective crime prevention.

Over the decades, strands of complementary research on burglars' cognitions, behavior and decision-making have emerged, each study building on the last. With the offender firmly as the focus of attention in this work (Nee, 2010), this has led to: increasingly sophisticated methodologies; research questions generated, explored and validated by the offenders themselves; and the creation of a considerable body of knowledge. Theoretical development, however, has been disparate with scholars augmenting both environmental/rational choice perspectives (e.g. Brantingham & Brantingham, 2004; Cromwell, Olson & Avary, 1991) and more macro-oriented social control and deterrence models (e.g. Jacques, Wright & Allen, 2014; Wright & Decker, 1994). The epistemological value of pulling together a dysfunctional expertise model of burglary would be to more clearly explain what we know about the proximate decisions and behavior of the burglar at the scene of the crime and also to set the scene for a more exacting enquiry of such issues in future research. While most closely aligned with situational perspectives, it should be a valuable complementary tool to social control models.

The dysfunctional expertise approach to understanding the workings of the offender's mind in and around the scene of the crime, is based on decades of experimental research in the cognitive sciences. The latter work highlights the importance of processes that become unconscious and automatic over time through practice and recognition of trigger cues, alongside more deliberative, conscious decisions and behavior. To set the context for this article, our posited model includes four stages of decision-making that occur in the days, hours and minutes leading up to the commission of the crime and beyond, as follows:

1. Automatic, unintentional, pre-conscious *appraisal* of the environment that cannot be turned off
2. Superior, automatic *recognition* of the environmental, offense-related cues meaningfully related to the domain of expertise
3. The activation of complex cognitive schemas, built up through practice, allowing instantaneous, compensatory access to a rich number of exemplars and heuristics. This in turn will guide:
4. Speedy responses to environmental cues that have worked in the past in the form of the playing out of behavioral scripts, allowing a relatively automatic commission of the act.

For a more detailed account in relation to how this model was derived, see Nee & Ward (2015–this issue). The intention in the current article is to demonstrate how it can be used to more precisely capture and explain what we know about burglary and how it might prove useful in future research. Specifically, I hope to use the model to describe and explain processes from the beginning of the offense decision chain (some time away from the crime) to the end (post-offense) in a more cohesive way. I will look in turn at research underpinning the scanning of the environment for 'criminogenic' cues that occurs in advance of and during target selection; the journey to crime; the process of target selection; target entry and commission of the crime; and the cognitive and emotional processes in the hours after the crime. The

implications of using this model and future directions for research in order to validate its usefulness as an explanatory tool will then be discussed.

## 2. Pre-conscious scanning of the environment

The idea that burglars scan the environment as part of their routine, daily activities has been around almost as long as offender-based research on burglars has. Bennett and Wright (1984) were the first to coin the term 'searchers' (p. 43). This group represented around half of the 117 experienced, convicted burglars in one of their studies. The term 'searcher' signified that target choice was made at the scene of the crime, using previously learned environmental cues that indicated the vulnerability of the property. Typically, the *initial* decision to commit the burglary emerged some time before target choice and the commission of the crime, as a result of the need for funds, some days or hours before the crime. As a consequence the burglar then traveled to an environment/district thought to be favorable for burglary based on previous experience, and searched for a suitable target. A further 17% of Bennett and Wright's sample returned later to an already chosen 'vulnerable' residence noted during routine daily activities (e.g. in the course of their employment and leisure activities) using the same environmental cues (affluence, accessibility etc.) that their 'searcher' counterparts had used while searching for a target. If for some reason this 17% were deterred from entering their property of choice, they would search for another suitable one in the same location. Bennett & Wright's work was exemplary in the sense that alongside interview methods, they also undertook a number of experiments. These elicited the offenders' free-response to visual cues in videos and photos to corroborate the apparent skill of the burglar in choosing targets. They did not use comparison groups however and their samples involved only incarcerated burglars as was criticized later (see Nee & Taylor, 1988 and Wright & Decker, 1994). Criticisms aside, they produced important evidence that the majority of experienced burglars undertook routine scanning of the environment for suitable targets in advance of the actual crime that is not opportunistic or wholly impulsive. In relation to Nee & Ward's (2015–this issue) model of expertise, their work suggests that the strength of the potential reward of burglary, linked to positive emotions in memory, will make some cues in the everyday environment more powerful and salient than others, affecting motivation and allowing the goal (of burglary) to be activated unconsciously (Chartrand & Bargh, 2002). This underpins the superior-situational awareness that burglars (and other offenders) appear to possess, represented in Stages 1 and 2 of our model above.

Even before Bennett & Wright's landmark research, Shover's early ethnographic interviews addressing burglars' behavior and lifestyles in the USA pointed to the importance of offenders' appraisal of the environment in advance of committing an offense. In his 1973 study of 143 experienced burglars (mostly incarcerated though often not for burglary) Shover described the 'good burglar' who was technically competent, relatively successful and tended to specialize in burglary. His interviewees described 'scouting trips' in their free time – cruising around looking for potential targets based on value and vulnerability. A team of burglars would then visit a few times to assess their approach and the best time of day to approach the target.

On the basis of Bennett and Wright's work, Nee and Taylor undertook a series of three studies in the Republic of Ireland in order to replicate or otherwise this seemingly superior knowledge and skill apparent in burglars' decision-making in the criminogenic environment. They improved on previous work by including comparison groups of potential 'novices' (householders) and did not rely on self-report methods only, by utilizing free-responding experiments. In their interview study (Nee & Taylor, 1988) and two experiments using maps and slides of residential areas (Nee & Taylor, 2000; Taylor & Nee, 1988), experienced burglars identified the environmental factors that influenced their decisions to offend. Three quarters of the Nee and Taylor samples fell into the 'searcher' category, making the initial

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