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The scripts and expertise of firesetters: A preliminary conceptualization

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ABSTRACT

The importance of cognition in the facilitation and reinforcement of criminal behavior has been highlighted and recognized in numerous offender populations. Coupled with this is an emerging body of literature suggesting that offenders may, in fact, display a certain level of expertise in their offending. In this paper, the notion of offending expertise along with cognition—specifically the concept of offense scripts—will be explored in relation to firesetting behavior for the first time. Using research evidence and clinical experience this paper outlines a preliminary conceptual framework of the potential scripts and types of expertise that are likely to characterize firesetters. The content, structure, and etiological functions of these scripts and expertise are described. Future research and practical implications of the proposed firesetting scripts and expertise are also considered.

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1. Introduction

Figures indicate that between 2007 and 2011 there were an estimated 282,600 deliberate fires reported to U.S. fire departments annually. These fires resulted in 420 deaths, 1360 injuries, and $1.3 billion in direct property damage per year (Campbell, 2014). Yet, surprisingly, very little is known about the antecedents of deliberate firesetting or how best to treat it clinically (Gannon & Pina, 2010).

Of particular note, is the lack of attention that has been given to the concepts of scripts within deliberate firesetting. This paper sets out to explore the concept of fire scripts in detail through considering contemporary research and clinical experience associated with firesetters. This paper will also, for the first time, consider the notion of expertise in relation to firesetting. Other areas of offending such as sexual offending, burglary, and violent offending have demonstrated the presence of expertise (Bourke, Ward, & Rose, 2012; Nee & Meenaghan, 2006; Nee & Taylor, 2000; Topalli, 2005). However, the concept of expertise in firesetting has never been considered.

Throughout this paper the term *firesetting* will be used to describe all intentional acts of setting a fire. This allows consideration of all deliberate firesetting that may be assessed and treated by consulting psychiatrists and clinicians rather than just those that culminate in criminal convictions for 'arson'. Furthermore, when using the term firesetters we refer to males over 18 years old.

In this paper, we will provide an overview of the concepts of scripts and expertise taken from the wider literature (see also Nee & Ward, in 2015–this issue). We first examine the concept of scripts and expertise in the general offending literature. We then describe current theories of adult firesetting; examining any possible reference to the concepts of scripts or expertise. Following this, through utilizing previous theory and clinical experience in firesetting, we explore the concept of scripts in relation to firesetting and theorizing possible scripts firesetters may hold. We then consider how the concept of expertise can be applied to the firesetting domain. We conclude by attempting, for the first time, to explain the relationship between the constructs of scripts and expertise in the firesetting domain. We also consider how these concepts may be used to facilitate the treatment of firesetters.

2. Scripts: general concepts

Within psychology, scripts (a form of cognition) generally refer to schematic knowledge structures that facilitate individuals' interpretation, evaluation, prediction, production, or control of circumstances that are goal-dependent and guide behavior (Schank & Abelson, 1977; Tomkins, 1991; Ward & Hudson, 2000; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Fiske and Taylor (1991) suggest that scripts hold information relating to the roles, rules, and props of a series of events. Scripts also represent activities that are common, routine, or well practiced (Abelson, 1981; Anderson, 1995). A universal example of a script is that of the 'restaurant script'. Procedural knowledge means that we all know what to do in a restaurant: enter, wait to be seated, get the menu, order, eat, get the bill, pay, and exit (Cornish, 1994). Scripts are mostly unconscious, socially learnt, extremely resistant to change, and influence how one attends to, organizes, and recalls information (Baldwin, 1992; Beauregard, Proulx, Rossmo, Leclerc, & Allaire, 2009; Demorest, 1995; Zadney & Gerard, 1974). Memory has been shown to be particularly susceptible to the influence of scripts (Bellezza & Bower, 1981; Bower, Black, & Turner, 1979; Gibbs & Tenney, 1980; Graesser, Woll, Kowalski, & Smith, 1980). Furthermore, Tomkins (1991) suggests that while a script is informed by how an individual perceives a given situation, over time the script itself becomes self-confirming.

2.1. Types of scripts

2.1.1. Sexual scripts

Sexual scripts refer to mental representations that allow one to interpret and guide sexual behavior (Gagon, 1990). Ward and Hudson (2000) argue that scripts are goal-dependent "action schemas", used to "delineate the who, what, where, how, and why of behavior" (p. 195). Ward and Hudson (2000) and Ward and Siegert (2002) have readily applied this to the concept of sexual offending hypothesizing that all sexual scripts contain the same elements, but the form and content of scripts vary significantly depending upon an individual's learning history. Importantly, Ward and Siegert (2002) hypothesize that early abuse may lead to the development of distorted sexual scripts.

2.1.2. Aggression scripts

Huesmann (1988) and his colleague (Huesmann & Eron, 1984) propose that aggressive behavior in children occurs due to the development of aggression scripts in early childhood. These scripts develop through a dual process of observational and enactive learning. Huesmann and Eron (1984) propose that aggression is self-perpetuating through the processes of encoding, retrieval, and rehearsal. In other words, when a child behaves aggressively they become more exposed to aggressive situations. This, in turn, increases encoding opportunities and rehearsal of aggressive situations. This ultimately results in aggressive situations being retrieved in order to solve a problem (i.e., aggression continuing into adulthood).

2.1.3. Crime and offense scripts

Crime scripts were first proposed by Cornish (1994). Cornish views scripts as knowledge structures used to organize information in order to understand criminal activity. Crime scripts were borne out of an attempt to better account for the commission of a crime (Leclerc, Proulx, & Beauregard, 2009). Cornish defines crime scripts as a procedural step-by-step account of the criminal act, spanning the entire criminal event (i.e. before, during, and after). For example, criminal actions such as car theft may involve a procedural sequence of stages such as: (1) stealing the car, (2) car concealment, (3) car disguise, (4) marketing of the car, and (5) car disposal (Cornish, 1994; Tremblay, Talon, & Hurley, 2001). Importantly, Cornish proposes that increased understanding of crime scripts will facilitate crime prevention policies.

In addition to crime scripts, Ward and Hudson (2000) have proposed offense scripts. Similar to general scripts, offense scripts are cognitive frameworks that contain information to guide behavior. However, unlike general scripts, offense scripts contain information that relates to offending. Such information is developed over a period