



The implicit theories 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. In particular, professionals have theorized that various offender populations hold offense-supportive schemas or implicit theories that require treatment in therapy. However, the role of cognition in deliberate firesetting has received no focused conceptual or theoretical attention. Using current research evidence and theory relating to general cognition and the characteristics of firesetters, this paper outlines a preliminary conceptual framework of the potential cognitions (in the form of implicit theories) that are likely to characterize firesetters. Five implicit theories are proposed that may be associated with firesetting behavior. The content, structure, and etiological functions of these implicit theories are described as well as the cognitive similarities between firesetters and other offender types. Future research implications and practical implications of the proposed implicit theories are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Latest U.S. firesetting statistics show that in 2007 there were 309,200 deliberately set fires, causing 480 deaths, 1450 injuries and \$1.3 billion dollars of direct damage. A further three fire-fighters

were killed and 6100 injured in responding to intentionally set fires (Hall, 2010). It is clear therefore that deliberate firesetting involves a very high human and financial cost. Despite this there is a dearth of multi-factor theories of firesetting and little understanding of the treatment needs of firesetters (Gannon & Pina, 2010). Theories developed to account for adult firesetting (e.g., Dynamic Behavior Theory; Fineman, 1980; Multi-Trajectory Theory of Adult Firesetting; Gannon, Ó Ciardha, et al., in press) highlight the importance of offense-supportive cognitions in the firesetting process but do not

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include detailed descriptions of these cognitions. Thus, the cognitions associated with firesetting represent a potential treatment need requiring further explication for assessing psychiatrists and psychologists (Doley, Fineman, Fritzon, Dolan, & McEwan, 2011). This paper sets out to explore the cognitive component associated with firesetting in detail. At this point in time, the literature we are drawing upon to inform our theoretical conceptualizations is limited. We, therefore, anticipate that empirical testing will inevitably result in further amendment and refinements and provide a fertile framework from which to build a more comprehensive picture of firesetters' cognition. In order to increase the conceptual clarity of the paper we will refer only to firesetters over the age of 18.¹ We will also use the term 'firesetting' as opposed to 'arson' to refer to intentional acts of setting fire. This is because arson represents a legal term that differs greatly in meaning across various jurisdictions. The term 'firesetting', on the other hand, refers to all possible acts of deliberate firesetting that may be assessed and treated by consulting psychiatrists and clinicians that do not necessarily culminate in criminal convictions for 'arson'.

One major challenge facing the development of theories of firesetting is the heterogeneity of firesetters as a group. Firesetters differ greatly in their motivations for committing offenses along with their personality characteristics, developmental features, and offending histories (for reviews, see Gannon & Pina, 2010; Gannon, Tyler, et al., *in press*). As a result of this heterogeneity, it is likely that firesetters will show considerable variety in the offense-supportive cognitions that they hold. Additionally, given some firesetters could be considered generalists (having many types of offenses) and some specialists (having predominantly firesetting offenses; Soothill, Francis, & Liu, 2008), it is likely that the etiological cognitions of firesetters exhibit considerable overlap with general offenders in addition to cognitions that set them apart. In this paper, we will briefly examine current theories of adult firesetting; paying particular attention to the hypothesized role of cognition. Then, we will examine and introduce the concept of implicit theories or offense-facilitative schemas as discussed in the literature associated with antisocial behavior more broadly. Finally, using previous theory and empirical research in firesetting, we apply the concept of implicit theories—for the first time—to the etiology of firesetting. By theorizing the offense supportive cognitions of firesetters, we hope to facilitate more tangible targets for the assessment and treatment of firesetters in clinical practice.

2. Theories of adult firesetting

Until very recently, only two multifactor theories of firesetting were available for the consulting professional: Dynamic Behavior Theory (Fineman, 1980, 1995) and Functional Analysis Theory (Jackson, Glass, & Hope, 1987). Of these, only Fineman's Theory refers to the cognition of firesetters in any meaningful sense. Within this theory, firesetting is viewed as the result of key historical psychosocial influences that direct and shape an individual's vulnerability to set fires via social learning. Cognitions are hypothesized to play a role in firesetting via "immediate environmental contingencies that encourage firesetting behaviors" (1995, p. 43). It is not clear, however, whether such cognitions are viewed as justifications of the act or etiological attitudes and beliefs that contribute to the act on a more fundamental/causal level.

More recently, Gannon, Ó Ciardha, et al. (*in press*) presented a new framework, the Multi-Trajectory Theory of Adult Firesetting (M-TTAF), in which multiple factors are proposed to interact and result in firesetting behavior. Gannon et al. hypothesize that a combination of *developmental factors* (i.e., caregiver environment, abusive experiences), *biological factors/temperament* (e.g., brain structure),

cultural factors (e.g., societal beliefs and attitudes towards fire), *social learning factors* (e.g., fire experiences, coping scripts), and *contextual factors* (e.g., life events and other contextual triggers) contribute to firesetting. Gannon et al. also hypothesize that as a result of these factors, *psychological vulnerabilities* (e.g., inappropriate fire interest, offense-supportive cognition, self/emotional regulation issues, and communicative problems) develop and subsequently represent key clinical features observed in therapy. Gannon et al. hypothesize that distinct psychological vulnerabilities predominate for different firesetters and as a result individuals can be conceptualized as belonging to one of five prototypical trajectories leading to firesetting: *Antisocial cognition*, *grievance*, *fire interest*, *emotionally expressive/need for recognition*, and *multi-faceted*. Each of these trajectories involves one or more characteristic vulnerabilities and is described in brief below.

3. Key prototypical M-TTAF trajectories

3.1. Antisocial cognition

Individuals following the antisocial cognition trajectory are hypothesized to engage in a generally criminal lifestyle without any particular interest in fire. Thus, fire is viewed simply as a means to an end. The types of offense-supportive attitudes hypothesized to be held by these individuals revolve around criminality generally; such individuals are also hypothesized to exhibit self-regulation issues, problems with impulsivity, and conduct disorder or antisocial personality disorder. Hypothesized motivators for setting fires may include boredom, vandalism, crime concealment, profit, or revenge.

3.2. Grievance

As with antisocial trajectory firesetters, individuals following the grievance trajectory are hypothesized to hold no particular fascination with fire; instead viewing fire as a powerful means to an end. Core issues for these individuals are hypothesized to involve problems with self-regulation, aggression, anger, and hostility. Additional risk factors are likely to include communication problems and inappropriate fire scripts. Potential clinical features include low assertiveness, poor communication, and a fusion of scripts involving aggression and fire. The key hypothesized motivators for firesetting in this group are revenge or retribution.

3.3. Fire interest

Individuals following a fire interest trajectory are hypothesized to be fascinated by fire. They may also have developed scripts whereby fire is used as a coping strategy and hold cognitions and deeply ingrained attitudes that support firesetting in addition to impulse control deficits. Hypothesized motivators for setting fires would include an inherent interest in fire, thrill seeking, stress, or boredom. Gannon et al. (*in press*) argue that a diagnosis of pyromania (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) would not be necessary for an individual to fall within this trajectory.

3.4. Emotionally expressive/need for recognition

Firesetters following this trajectory are hypothesized to have difficulties with communication and may be conceptualized as two subtypes. Those who belong to the *emotionally expressive* subtype are hypothesized to additionally exhibit difficulties with problem solving and impulsivity. Thus, contextual factors are hypothesized to facilitate firesetting since these individuals feel unable to voice their needs through other means. Those following the *need for recognition* subtype of this trajectory are hypothesized to also communicate via firesetting but do not exhibit the impulsivity associated with the emotionally expressive type and instead may pre-plan firesetting

¹ However, we view our discussions as being relevant for both male and female firesetters.

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