



Firesetting: Psychopathology, theory and treatment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we comprehensively review characteristics of adult firesetters, and the etiological features of firesetting. In particular, we pay attention to contemporary research available as to core traits and psychopathological features required to understand firesetters, and the classificatory systems and etiological theories developed to understand firesetting. This evaluation of contemporary research suggests that clinical knowledge and practice relating to firesetting is extremely underdeveloped relative to other areas of forensic-clinical psychology. We conclude that there are very few etiological theories available to guide consulting clinicians in this area, and little information available specifying the exact criminogenic needs associated with firesetters, or how these needs compare to other offender groups. The significant lack of contemporary treatment programs designed to target firesetting behavior is also noted. We conclude by highlighting core areas for future research and treatment progression.

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1. Firesetting: psychopathology, theory and treatment

Intentional firesetting has devastating consequences both personally and financially. Latest available statistics show that around 323,900 intentionally set fires were recorded by US fire departments in 2005 and these fires caused 490 deaths, 9100 injuries, and created over 1 billion dollars of costs relating to property destruction (Hall, 2007). Given the enormous societal costs associated with intentional firesetting, it is curious that current psychological understanding of this act is relatively underdeveloped, especially when one compares the extant firesetting literature to that relating to violence or sexual offending. The only existing reviews on firesetting behavior have tended either to focus solely upon child and juvenile firesetters (Kolko, 1985), or have approached firesetting from a psychiatric perspective (Blumberg, 1981; Geller, 1987; Geller, 2008; Ritchie & Huff, 1999). However, only approximately half of intentional firesetting brought to professional's attention is committed by juveniles (Cassel & Bernstein, 2007), and psychiatrically-informed reviews do not typically outline the core psychological components necessary for the treatment of firesetters. Thus, there is a strong need for a psychologically-informed review on firesetting for consulting clinicians and forensic psychologists who work with adult firesetters.

Our paper does not intend to provide an *exhaustive* review of firesetting since to do so would entail numerous historical pieces. However, we do aim to provide a comprehensive and contemporary overview of the diagnostic criteria, etiological features, theory, and treatment relevant to adult firesetting. Our main aim is to provide clinical practitioners with a comprehensive psychological understanding of adult firesetters, paying particular attention to clinical and etiological features, firesetting behavioral specificity, issues of diagnostic criteria relevant to pathological firesetting, and current treatment issues. Based upon this review, we then make some suggestions for future empirical research and evidence-based practice relevant to firesetting. In order to increase the clarity and focus of this review, and unless otherwise stated, we will focus our discussions on firesetting committed by individuals over the age of 18. We will, however, refer to research with juveniles and children where we feel it is appropriate to do so. Further, because the majority of known adult firesetters are male (Lewis & Yarnell, 1951; Rice & Harris, 2008), we will focus our review on male firesetters (readers interested in female firesetters should consult Stewart, 1993; Gannon, *in press*).

2. Defining firesetting

In law, intentional firesetting is typically referred to as *arson*. Arson may generally be defined as the intentional destruction of property—via fire—for unlawful purposes (Kolko, 2002; Williams, 2005). In the US, the exact legal definition of arson may vary across states. Typically, however, the following criteria are present in legal definitions of arson: (i) there must be some element of *intention* underlying the act; (ii) the fire must be set for an *unlawful purpose* (i.e., to harm others or to profit fraudulently), and (iii) the fire must *damage* property or belongings in some way (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004; Hall, 2007; Kolko, 2002; Williams, 2005). Since arson is a legal term that may vary across jurisdictions, we choose not to use it throughout this review. Instead, we will use the term “firesetting” to refer to all *intentional* acts of setting fire. This definition ensures that we encapsulate maximal motives associated with firesetting as observed by the consulting clinician.

3. Firesetters' characteristics

Information about the known characteristics of firesetters is vital for the consulting professional since this information can highlight key areas for clinical assessment and exploration. Such information can also provide guidance on the various treatment needs and responsivity factors relevant for individual or group work with detected firesetters.

3.1. Sociodemographic features

Figures suggest that the ratio of male to female firesetters may fall in the region of 6:1 (Bourget & Bradford, 1989; Lewis & Yarnell, 1951; Stewart, 1993¹) and the majority of apprehended firesetters are white (Bennett & Hess, 1984; Ritchie & Huff, 1999; Rix, 1994). Generally, male firesetters admitted for psychiatric evaluation appear similar to other criminals on factors such as low economic status, poor education, and unskilled employment (Fig. 1) (Doley, 2003a; Hurley & Monahan, 1969; Rice & Harris, 1991; Räsänen, Hirvenoja, Hakko, & Väisänen, 1995; Ritchie & Huff, 1999; Wolford, 1972). However, a large number of studies have shown that firesetters are generally younger than non-firesetting criminals (Hurley & Monahan, 1969; Rice & Harris, 1991). Other researchers have suggested that firesetters may be characterized by lower IQ levels relative to non-firesetting criminals (Lewis & Yarnell, 1951; Rice & Harris, 1991).

3.2. Offending history

Several studies show that firesetting is often part of a wider array of general offending (Rice & Harris, 1996; Ritchie & Huff, 1999; Hill et al., 1982; Sapsford, Banks, & Smith, 1978; Soothill, Ackerley, & Francis, 2004). However, firesetters' offending histories appear to be more similar to that of property offenders than violent offenders (Hill et al., 1982; Tennent, McQuaid, Loughnane, & Hands, 1971; Vreeland & Levin, 1980). For example, Hill et al. (1982) compared the offense histories of individuals referred for psychiatric assessment due to firesetting ($n = 38$) with other inpatient referrals predominantly characterized by either property or violent offenses ($n = 54$). Overall, Hill et al. found that the majority of firesetters were characterized by one or more recorded criminal charges. However, the firesetters' profiles appeared to be different both to the violent and the property offenders. In short, firesetters appeared less violent than the violent offenders, yet more violent than the property offenders. Using discriminant analysis procedures, in which previous violence, psychiatric diagnoses, and substance abuse associated with offending were identified as predictors, Hill et al. attempted to classify firesetters as either property or violent offenders. Using this procedure, 60% of the firesetters were characterized as property offenders. Other researchers have also concluded that firesetters are not generally characterized by interpersonal violence (Jackson, Glass, & Hope, 1987a; Hurley & Monahan, 1969; Räsänen, et al., 1995; Soothill et al., 2004) or sexual offending (McKerracher & Dacre, 1966). In support of these findings, recidivism research shows that firesetters are more likely to recidivate non-violently than they are to recidivate violently over a mean follow-up period of 7.8 years (57% non-violent recidivism versus 31% violent recidivism; Rice & Harris, 1996). Nevertheless, firesetters do recidivate violently and it appears likely that aggression plays a significant role in firesetting behaviors; although the nature of this aggression seems avoidant (see McKerracher & Dacre's Displaced Aggression Hypothesis, 1966). In summary then, firesetters can and do display interpersonal violence. However, most firesetters are typically versatile, engaging in numerous instances of both theft and property offenses.

3.3. Developmental features

Studies show that, relative to non-firesetters, children who set fires are more likely to originate from large and financially impoverished families (Bradford, 1982; Heath, Hardesty, Goldfine, & Walker, 1983) characterized by neglectful parenting styles (Showers & Pickrell, 1987; Slavkin, 2000) and physical or sexual abuse (McCarty & McMahon, 2005; Moore, Thompson-Pope, & Whited, 1996; Showers & Pickrell, 1987). Such

¹ See Dickens et al. (2007) for a comparison of male and female firesetters' characteristics.

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