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Making an Arsonist: A Psychological Approach to Understanding Expressive Arson

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Abstract

The offence of arson comes under the category of property crime, although the serious consequences of the offence often have a huge impact on both people and public costs, with serious injury and death potential outcomes. As with many crimes, there are various motivations that may be behind a person committing arson. These can be understood under whether the offence was instrumental and therefore carrying out the crime for personal gain, or expressive, carrying out the offence due to difficulty in expressing their emotions [3]. Instrumental arsonists may be easier to detect due to an often obvious financial or personal motivation [4,5,7], and these offenders are generally more common within the population of arsonists. However, perhaps more important to explore in relation to where psychology can best aid understanding and inform practice, is in cases where there is little or no instrumental value. These expressive arsonists are significantly more likely to reoffend than their instrumental counterparts [11], adding further to the need to gain a greater understanding of the factors that play a role in such individuals' trajectories. The present paper reviews the current literature surrounding expressive arson to present a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to this deviant behaviour. In doing so, the present paper draws on explanations from developmental, psychopathological and personality psychology to critically form such an understanding and present this in an understandable way that possesses heuristic value for the psychological community with an interest in this area.

Keywords: Arsonist; Expressive Arson; Crime

Arson is defined as the deliberate and malicious burning or attempted burning of personal property such as a building, home, or vehicle [1]. It is a devastating crime that can not only cause death and injury, but can also be responsible for severe financial damage to both property owners and governments [2]. Within the United States, there are over 500,000 occurrences of arson each year [1]. As with most crimes, there are numerous different types of arsonists due to differing motivations for committing the crime [3]. Therefore, the use of one theory to explain why people commit arson would produce a reductionist model for understanding the complexities of the crime. As a result, arson must be examined as an offence with different sub types of crime, each having its own psychological explanation. Arson offences can be differentiated as either expressive offences or instrumental offences [3].

Instrumental offences involve cases of arson where the perpetrator is motivated to carry out the crime for personal gain. Common examples of instrumental motivations are arson as a method of concealing a crime [4]; and arson as a way of financial gain, referred to as arson for profit [5,6]. One of the most common motivations for instrumental arson is revenge [7]. The motivational influences of these types of arson can easily be identified, however, in cases of arson where there is no apparent financial or personal motive, pathological ab-

normalities present within the offender are often thought to be the cause of the criminal behaviour [8-10]. This type of arson is referred to as expressive arson. Geller [2] stated that expressive arson can be a result of the individual attempting to express their emotions, through which many gain sexual satisfaction. The rate of recidivism is significantly higher for expressive arsonists, relative to instrumental arsonists [11]. As a result, it is important for researchers to identify the causes behind expressive arson in an attempt to treat the problem and minimize the probability of repeat offending [12].

Developmental Implications

The developmental approach to explaining arson explores the effects earlier childhood events would have on an individual's personality in later life and whether these affected personality factors could have a mediating effect on motivating an individual to commit arson [13]. Bradford [14] compared 34 arsonists against a control group of 50 participants and found that one of the most common similarities shared by the arsonists, but not the control group, was difficulties at school. Moreover, Bradford found that the majority of the arsonists in his sample had failed to complete their high school education. One implication of this similarity would be to suggest that the lack of education could be a contributing factor for committing arson. However, there are many arguments against this theory. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that only a small percentage of high school 'drop-outs' fall under the category of arsonists. Secondly, Kolko [11] states that the majority of arsonists were found to have received some sort of psychological treatment at a young age. This would suggest that the psychological faults are already present in arsonists before they start attending high school. Therefore, it can be proposed that there must be another explanation for the relationship between arsonists and failure to graduate from high school. Blumberg [15] discovered that many arsonists were brought up in adoptive care or foster homes and therefore in line with recent research, may have experienced some form of childhood victimisation or neglect [16]. The lack of a typical childhood upbringing and environment could be a possible explanation behind why many of these individuals, who go on to commit arson, fail to finish high school.

Despite evidence suggesting that failure to graduate from high school does not directly cause an individual to commit arson, there are still ways in which it could increase the probability of a person to commit arson. Bradford [14] found that compared to other delinquents in mental health treatment facilities, arsonists showed extremely poorer social skills. Individuals at a young age develop and strengthen their social skills mostly at school through interacting with others [17]. Thus, it can be equated that the failure to finish high school could hinder the development of adequate social skills for an individual; which could in turn, contribute to causing an individual to engage in fire setting.

Furthermore, Canter and Fritzon [3] describe expressive arsonists as individuals who resort to fire setting because they suffer from emotional distress and struggle to express their emotions through normal means. As a result, the individual may commit arson as a method of emotionally acting out [2]. This theory can be linked to the findings of Bradford [14], a common way of expressing emotions is through interacting with others, which requires some level of social skill. As Bradford's study identified, arsonists generally showed poorer social skills and this could offer an explanation as to why many of them choose to express their emotions through antisocial behaviours such as fire setting.

Emotional Implications

One of the most frequent emotions acted out by expressive arsonists is anger. Jackson, Hope and Glass [18] elaborated on the displaced aggression hypothesis in arsonists. They stated that one of the reasons many offenders commit arson is because these pathological individuals redirect the anger onto buildings as they see them as easier targets, and a way to channel all of their aggression. This theory was supported in their research which found that arsonists rated their selves as being far less assertive than other violent offenders and participants in the control group did as well as recent research that has explored abnormal emotional functioning within those suffering from psychopathic personality styles [19,20].

Substance Abuse

Various studies have identified alcohol abuse as a consistent habit amongst expressive arsonists [21]. This is supported by the findings of Geller [2] who found that 84% of arsonists had experienced problems with alcohol abuse. Despite having this relationship identified, there is no empirical evidence suggesting that alcohol abuse increases the probability of committing arson. Depression could be offered as an explanation for the link between alcohol abuse and arson, as it was found to be a common psychiatric symptom present in most arsonists [22] and is notable for being a strong cause for alcohol abuse [23]. Räsänen, Hirvenoja, Hakko, and Väisänen [24] looked at 98 cases of arson and identified that over one third of these cases were an attempt of suicide. Suicide by arson has been used by some sufferers of depression [3], thus, it can be insinuated that depression may be a contributing factor for influencing certain individuals to carry out an act of arson.

Impulsivity

Although the background literature identifies a number of traits such as depression and displaced anger as factors influencing aggression, it cannot be assumed that these factors are acting as the sole motivators for arson. For instance, it is evident that not all individuals who suffer from depression become arsonists. This is due to the fact that most individuals can control their impulses to act out through conscious thought processes. Barnett and Spitzer [25] found that arsonists have weaker abilities to control their impulsivity as compared to other criminal offenders. This innate lack of control could be the missing link in explaining why certain pathological adults commit arson. However, the study measured the individuals' abilities to control their impulses through a PCL-R assessment. The PCL-R assessment is a psychological test which is used to test for a wider range of traits for psychopathy. It can be argued that a more specific test for impulsivity such as the Barratt Impulsivity Scale (BIS) would provide more accurate results [26]. Unfortunately, very little research has attempted to successfully measure impulsivity in arsonists by using the BIS.

Personality Correlates

The general overview of the literature on arson has found that personality disorders are a recurring theme within arsonists [14,25]. As well as depression, other personality disorders commonly found in arsonists include paranoia and psychosis [22]. This suggests that personality disorders could influence an individual to commit arson. Although the majority of findings in the literature support this association between personality disorders and arson, there are still some inconsistencies. Labree, *et al.* [26] found that in a sample of arsonists, only 28% suffered from psychotic disorders, which was a smaller proportion of offender relative to other forms of offenders. These statistics would suggest that there is no difference in arsonists and non-arson offenders, when looking at personality disorders and thus, personality disorders would not have a direct influence on committing arson. The study of Labree, *et al.* [26] however, was methodologically flawed in regards to its sample size. The study only looked at 25 arsonists, which is a considerably small sample size to be generalised as a representation for all arsonists. In the case of arson, it has been found that there are different types caused by varying motivations and so this would suggest that a sample of 25 would yield unreliable results.

Unfortunately, this methodological flaw of small sample sizes is a consistent short coming amongst most of the literature on arson, especially when looking at earlier research on this topic [27]. This is primarily due to earlier research mainly relying on case reports for their data. An implication for future research could be to carry out a meta-analysis on the previous research on arson, allowing the study to yield more reliable results. Another problem with using the case reports were that researchers were only able to use information that had already been extracted and thus were restricted on the amount of information they could obtain. As a result of this, there was limited research regarding the background of these arsonists [28]. Further still, research has long since displayed that personality assessments in themselves may not be an accurate and stable measure of personality types or disorders and should undoubtedly be treated with caution [29].

Intelligence

An additional factor that could increase the risk of committing arson is general intelligence. Räsänen, Hirvenoja, Hakko, and Väisänen [30] conducted a study involving 72 arsonists and found that 11% of them fell under the category of intellectual disability (higher than the average rate for the general population which is approximately 7.6%, MMWR, 1993) [31]. However, the results also showed that 51% of arsonists had average intelligence or above with 8% falling under the category of superior intelligence, suggesting that intelligence may not be a consistent factor in influencing arson. Furthermore, recent research by Labree, *et al.* [26] produced contradicting results which suggest that lower intelligence may not be more prevalent amongst arsonists in relation to the general population. Moreover, Geller [2] argues that research into the relationship between intelligence and arson has produced an abundance of inconsistent findings and therefore suggests that intelligence is not an effective factor of arson.

Summary

In summary, the background literature on arson offers various possible explanations for why expressive arsonists commit their crimes. These explanations can be drawn from identifying the multiple different consistencies found when examining behavioural and personality traits within arsonists. The general implications of the literature on arson are not as clearly set out due to many studies contradicting each other. This could be primarily due to the small sample sizes used in many studies, thus the first general implication of the literature review is the need for more studies incorporating larger sample sizes or a meta-analysis to combine previous studies, producing more accurate and reliable data. As mentioned previously, when exploring the contributing factors of arson, we cannot generalise all types of arson as one crime. The motives of an arsonist who sets a house on fire for insurance money compared with another who does it for sexual excitement are evidently distinct, therefore we can accept multiple explanations. A further weakness with the previous literature is that most studies do not mention the different motives for arson within their samples, making it difficult to identify specific personality traits as causes for specific types of arson. Finally, it must be highlighted that although many previous research studies have found relationships between certain personality and behavioural traits within arson, this does not imply that they are direct causes of the criminal behaviour but are, instead, influential factors which may increase the probability of an individual committing arson. Future endeavours to understand arson as a crime type should seek to investigate this under researched crime more comprehensively and upon integrating all aspects of the criminal justice process involved. With recent research displaying inaccuracies in eyewitness accounts [32-34] as well as the bias exhibited within decisions made by jurors at trial [35,36], the broader criminal justice system's implications upon individuals accused of crimes as socially deviant as arson may not lead to fair and just outcomes. Further still, in light of the aforementioned research reviewed that displays those committing crimes of arson are likely to be experiencing abnormal psychological and psychiatric issues, the extent to which punishment rather than treatment can be considered appropriate remains to be established.

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