

## **Residential Burglary: methodological and theoretical underpinnings**

By Claire Nee

### **Definition**

Surprisingly little focus has been given to explanations of specific types of crime, and the motivations, cognitions and behaviour that exemplify them. Of the property crimes which make up a notable proportion of recorded offending, residential burglary has been researched the most and represents the single-most developed type of offender-based research. Contrary to common belief, a burglary is not necessarily for theft. It can apply to any crime, such as assault or sexual harassment, whether the intended criminal act is committed or not. Originally under English Common Law burglary was limited to entry in residences at night, but it has been expanded to all criminal entries into any building, or even into a vehicle. If there is intent to commit a crime, this is burglary. If there is no such intent, the breaking and entering alone is probably at least illegal trespass. Over the last 30 years a small but notable strand of research on residential burglary has grown, substantially improving our understanding of who, why and how people illegally enter other people's properties. In doing so this work has created numerous important spin-offs in thinking about other types of crime and in terms of research methods, theoretical development and importantly crime prevention.

### **Historical and theoretical development**

Research on specific types of offenders began to emerge in the 1970's in the USA and the early 1980's in the UK. It was driven by a desire to move away from more generic, dispositional theories of crime and a new interest in the role of environment, opportunity and choice in the decision to offend. The idea grew that a 'one size fits all' approach to understanding the development of criminality may be substantially enhanced by more focussed understandings of the motivations, behaviours and decision-making behind particular crimes. The decisions and opportunities experienced by a serial predatory sex offender for instance, may be considerably different to those of a teenage shoplifter and it was clear that looking at different types of crimes would have substantial pay-offs in terms of crime prevention and our general understanding of crime. *Jennifer, I don't think there is a reference for this in that I don't think anyone has compared the motivations for committing different crimes.*

#### *Studies of convicted burglars*

In the burglary field, interview studies with convicted burglars in the USA began to emerge looking at the criminal career and lifestyle of the burglar including approaches to undertaking particular burglaries (Scarr, 1973; Shover, 1973; Reppetto, 1974; Waller and Okihiro, 1978). Maguire and Bennett (1982) in the UK looked at burglary from the perspective of the burglar, the victim and the recorded offence details. Given the growing interest in the influence of the environment on criminal decision-making, these studies began to provide clues as to aspects of the scene of the crime which were important to the offender and might therefore be changed in order to prevent crime. Further, even at this exploratory stage of research, burglars were emerging as systematic decision-makers in their selection of properties, not supporting the

indiscriminate and opportunistic approach to target selection that had been assumed by police and policy-makers. At the other end of the spectrum, neither were burglaries highly planned and organised, with perpetrators usually getting caught away from the scene of their crime due to chaotic lifestyles.

- For the first time focusing directly on the scene of the crime, Bennett and Wright (1984) conducted an interview study of over 300 convicted burglars which also involved experiments using videos and photographs of a variety of properties. Their findings revealed three main things:
- the decision to offend was sequential, with the first decision usually away from the scene of the crime based on an imminent need for money, followed by a search of a vulnerable area until a suitable property was found;
- burglars were interested in cues signifying occupancy, surveillability, accessibility and security at the scene of the potential crime; and
- burglars were again showing a systematic and rational approach to target selection and of the three types found (planners, searchers and opportunists) the vast majority were 'searchers'.

These findings strongly contributed to the developing theoretical perspective emerging at the time – that of Rational Choice Theory - of which the best example is Cornish and Clarke's (1986) 'The Reasoning Criminal'. The basic tenets of this approach were firstly to suggest that the decision to offend may not necessarily be driven by an inexorable urge to commit crime, but may be governed by the same degree of bounded rationality that drives all decisions in everyday life i.e. that there may be an element of choice based on previous experience. Secondly, decisions may

be influenced by the vulnerability of the environment or otherwise and the degree of opportunity for criminal activity. It also assumed a broader range of offender in which the majority of individuals would consider breaking the law if the risks are low and rewards high. Finally, rational choice theory encouraged offence-specific work such as that on burglary suggesting that very different crime prevention lessons were to be learned by researching different types of crimes. Cornish and Clarke did not set out to explain all of criminal behaviour by their rational choice perspective, but merely saw it as a useful adjunct to the multi-factorial theories of criminality which aim to describe the distal influences on such behaviour. Rational choice theory aims to explain some of the more proximal influences of the environment on cognition and as a result facilitated much useful research.

Very much in line with this theoretical perspective was Nee and Taylor's work in the late 1980's (Nee and Taylor, 1988; Taylor and Nee, 1988), with the final piece of the series being published later (Nee and Taylor, 2000). Working in the Republic of Ireland they sought to replicate some of the work that had been undertaken in Britain and to explore further the use of cues in decision-making about properties in a more empirical way. They were also the first to involve a control group of householders, to test the burglar's supposed expertise. The first piece of research involved a survey with convicted burglars which supported British findings in terms of lifestyle, level of skill, goods taken and cues used. The majority were 'searchers' (Bennett and Wright, 1984), took middle-range goods that could be easily exchanged for money (Maguire and Bennett, 1982) and used environmental cues which Nee and Taylor identified as layout, wealth, occupancy and security cues (Taylor and Nee, 1988).

Nee and Taylor then went on to simulate residential environments with groups of incarcerated burglars, using maps and slides to provide a more realistic, free-responding environment in which to gather data. They found that no type of cue was salient in decision-making and that different types of cues gained in importance depending on the combination of cues available on any one property. Target selection was highly habit-driven, based on prior successful learning and took place as Bennett and Wright (1984) had suggested mostly at the scene of the crime based on whatever constellation of cues and contingencies presented themselves at that particular criminogenic crime?? scene. The study highlighted that cues change on a daily if not hourly basis and the difficulty for crime prevention is that the law abiding member of the public are not good at second guessing the practiced decision-making of the burglar. One of the most striking findings emerging from these two experiments was the notable expertise shown by burglars in relation to householders. On the one hand when asked to put themselves in the place of the burglar searching for a target, householders were markedly haphazard and indiscriminate in relation to target selection, time taken and routes taken (Nee and Taylor, 2000). On the other hand the burglar emerged not as an opportunistic, indiscriminate, somewhat out-of-control individual, but as a systematic, expert decision-maker, using the bounded rationality that Cornish and Clarke (1986) had suggested, at least at the scene of the crime.

Other work which strongly supported the idea of expertise in burglars was that of Logie, Wright and Decker (1992) which demonstrated a hierarchy of expertise in recognising burglary cues with young burglars as most proficient, followed by offenders with no experience of burglary, then police officers and finally householders being least proficient.

### *Ethnographic work*

The vast majority of research carried out on burglars up to this point had been carried out on convicted burglars in prisons. Two key pieces of research emerged in the 1990's using markedly innovative methodologies - interviewing active burglars at the scene of recent crimes (Wright and Decker, 1994; Cromwell, Olson and Avery, 1991). Carried out in St Louis, Missouri and Texas respectively, these studies served to both extend our knowledge of what burglars do at the scene of the crime and support much of the prison-based findings unearthed in previous work, despite the massive cultural difference in their participants.

Cromwell et al's (1991) study served to educate us about drug use and decision-making at the scene of the crime and both studies supported the notion of the sequential decision chain, making final decisions based on predictable (for the burglar) combinations of cues at the scene of the crime. Like all the work before them, these burglars were looking for signs of relative wealth in their targets, easy access preferably at the sides and back of the property as well as good cover at the front. Security measures, unfortunately (and still to this day) were not an issue as these were either installed and unused or easily overcome (Wright and Decker, 1994).

The most ground-breaking part of Wright and Decker's work was the fact that, for the first time, burglars were asked about their decision-making and behaviour once *inside* the property. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, burglars described a similar rational, habit-driven process (which Wright and Decker (1994) called 'cognitive scripts') as they had used previously to choose the burglary targets they had now

entered, in order to navigate their way around the property with minimum risk and maximum gain. Very fixed patterns were described in which the majority went straight to the main bedroom collecting cash, guns and drugs, exiting within 20 minutes, with a minority stealing items from other bedrooms if they had the time. Burglars reported using these strategies to reduce anxiety and make the burglary as fast as possible with maximum gain (most were stealing from their drug dealers and were likely to be murdered if caught by the householder). The practised and methodical nature of the search inside the property described by these burglars was a compelling notion for the research community and was followed up in more recent work in the UK described below.

### **Methodological innovations**

As well as the wealth of knowledge this line of research has afforded about the burglar's decision-chain, the importance of cues at the scene of the crime and how to prevent burglary, it has also made a significant contribution to the development of research methodology for offence specific work. In many ways the refining of research methods over the years in burglary studies resembles the recommended framework described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) known as 'grounded theory' which ensures that the enquiry begins and remains as relevant, valid and reliable as possible. Instead of brainstorming research ideas without any evidence-base, researchers are encouraged to place the expert agent in whatever research domain at the centre of the work in the present case burglars. It is they who have the knowledge researchers want and they who should, from the very start generate the relevant research ideas and hypotheses which can be tested. The early American, British and Irish exploratory interviews with burglars could be seen as the primary stage in

grounded theory in which burglars themselves define the terms of reference and the hypotheses, in this case about burglary lifestyle and decision-making at the scene of the crime. Even within these early studies a progression can be seen from the more open-ended American interviews at the start to more structured interviews, informed by the previous findings in the later Irish work.

The next stage is to refine the methodology in line with research findings and new ideas that have been uncovered, always returning to the offender to verify and extend the line of enquiry. The experimental, empirical studies of Bennett and Wright (1984), Rengert and Wasilchick (1986) and Nee and Taylor (1988, 2000) are good examples of this next stage. In a further stage of refinement, the ethnographic work undertaken by Cromwell et al (1991) and Wright and Decker (1994) in the United States investigated burglars' target selection and decision-making in the most ecologically valid environment possible, the scene of a recent crime, verifying previous work and extending our knowledge further, particularly in relation to strategies inside the property. An added bonus of carrying out this courageous work was that it confirmed the validity of other types of research method (interviews and experiments) that had been carried out previously. With each refinement of research method we get closer to what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called 'theoretical elaboration' or the reality of the burglars' cognitions and behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

Work on burglary continues to emerge, usually with a particular emphasis on situational crime prevention (e.g. Bernasco and Luykx, 2003; Palmer, Holmes and Hollin, 2002). In a truly 'grounded' sense though, the American ethnographic work

has sparked recent research more focussed on the cognitions of burglars and the expertise they seem to display (Nee and Meenaghan, 2006). This interview study focused on burglars' strategies inside the property for the first time in the UK but revealed much about the cognitive mechanisms used by burglars in order to efficiently burgle the premises with least risk. Like the processes used in selecting a property to burgle, once inside participants described using very fixed patterns of behaviour again based on prior learning with respect to what worked most efficiently in the past, the majority starting with the main bedroom and working their way through the house within twenty minutes. Moreover their verbalisations signified the kind of approach characterised by experts in any other domain, namely: instantaneous, unconscious recognition of cues; speedy but very systematic searches; and the ability to multi-task while carrying out the 'expert' behaviour.

On the crime prevention front current findings are more pessimistic: the majority of participants had entered their most recent property through an open or unlocked window or door. Householders are 'novices' when it comes to burglary and simply do not think in the same way as the perpetrator. They install security, but fail to use it comprehensively.

The discoveries and methodological innovations that have been made with regards to research on residential burglary should not be restricted to this one crime. Work on expertise has also taken place in the field of sex offenders (Ward and Hudson, 2000) and street criminals (Topalli, 2005) and is beginning to reveal important insights for use in primary, secondary and tertiary crime prevention. It is highly likely that other types of crime involve a form of expertise and this needs researching. Borrowing

concepts and methods from mainstream cognitive psychology as done in recent research are likely to yield important insights in this type of forensic psychology and are highly recommended.

### **Further reading**

For a review of expertise and how it relates to residential burglary: Nee and Meenaghan (2006). For more information on different methodologies that can be used in offender specific work: Nee (2004). For a general review of work done in the field of burglary: Nee and Taylor (2000). For a recent description of Rational Choice Theory: (Newman, G., Clarke, R. V. & Giora Shoham, S (1997) (Eds.) *Rational choice and situational crime prevention : theoretical foundations*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

### **References**

- Bennett, T., & Wright, R. (1984), *Burglars on burglary*. Aldershot : Gower.
- Bernasco, W., & Luykx, F. (2003), 'Effects Of attractiveness, opportunity, and accessibility to burglars on residential burglary rates of urban neighbourhoods', *Criminology* 41: 981-1001.
- Cornish, D.B., & Clarke, R.V.G. (1986), 'Introduction', In D. B. Cornish And R. V. G. Clarke, Eds., *The reasoning criminal: rational choice perspectives on offending*, 1-13, New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Cromwell, P., Olson, J. & Avary, D. (1991). *Breaking and entering: an ethnographic analysis of burglary*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Logie, R.H., Wright, R.T. & Decker, S. (1992), 'Recognition memory performance and residential burglary', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 6: 109-123.
- Maguire, E.M.W. & Bennett, T. (1982), *Burglary in a dwelling: the offence, the offender and the victim*. London: Heineman Educational Books.
- Nee, C. (2004). The offender's perspective on crime: methods and principles in data collection. In A. Needs & G. Towl (Eds.), *Applying psychology to forensic practice*. London: BPS Blackwell.
- Nee C. (2003), 'Burglary research at the end of the millenium: an example of grounded theory?' *Security Journal*, 16: 37-44.

- Nee, C. & Meenaghan, A. (2006). Expert decision-making in burglars. *British Journal Of Criminology*, 46, 935-949.
- Nee, C. & Taylor, M. (2000), 'Examining burglars' target selection: interview, experiment, or ethnomethodology?' *Psychology, Crime And Law*, 6: 45-59.
- Nee, C. & Taylor, M. (1988), 'Residential burglary in the republic of ireland', In M. Tomlinson, T. Varley And C. Mccullagh, Eds., *Whose law and order*, 82-103, The Sociological Association Of Ireland: Galway.
- Palmer, E.J., Holmes, A. & Hollin, C.R. (2002), 'Investigating burglars' decisions factors influencing target choice, method of entry, reasons for offending, repeat victimisation of a property and victim awareness', *Security Journal*, 15: 7-18.
- Rengert, G. & Wasilchick, J. (1986), *Suburban burglary: a time and a place for everything*. Chicago: Springfield.
- Scarr, H.A. (1973), *Patterns of burglary*. Washington Dc:Government Printing Office.
- Shover, N. (1973), 'The Social organisation of burglary', *Social Problems*, 20: 499-514.
- Taylor, M. & Nee, C. (1988), 'The role of cues in simulated residential burglary', *British Journal Of Criminology*, 28: 105-116.
- Topalli, V. (2005), 'Criminal expertise and offender decision-making: an experimental analysis of how offenders and non-offenders differentially perceive social stimuli', *British Journal Of Criminology*, 45: 269-295.
- Waller, I. & Okihiro, N. (1978), *Burglary: the victim and the public*. Toronto: University Of Toronto Press.
- Ward, T. & Hudson, S. M. (2000), Sexual offenders' implicit planning: a conceptual model. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal Of Research And Treatment*, 12: 189-202.
- Wright, R.T. & Decker, S. (1994), *Burglars on the job: streetlife and residential break-ins*, Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Wright, R.T., Logie, R.H. & Decker, S.H. (1995), 'Criminal expertise and offender decision making: an experimental study of the target selection process in residential burglary', *Journal Of Research In Crime And Delinquency*, 32: 39-53.