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Expertise and Offending: Themes for Future Research

Claire Nee and Tony Ward

Author Note

Claire Nee, International Centre for Research in Forensic Psychology, Department of Psychology, King Henry Building, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, PO1 2DY, U.K. Tony Ward, School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Claire Nee, Department of Psychology, King Henry Building, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, PO1 2DY, U.K. E-mail: claire.nee@port.ac.uk. Telephone: +44 (0)2392 846308. Fax: +44 (0)2392 846300

Abstract:

In this final article, we note how the expertise paradigm has allowed us to assess the psychological processes involved in experienced decision-making in a relatively precise and micro-analytical way, in both deviant and non deviant contexts. We note that expert decision-making involves the increasingly fast and automatic recognition, over time and repeated exposure, of environmental cues relevant to a domain of expertise. In turn, these cues trigger a range of routine and habitual behavioral scripts, rapidly and unconsciously chosen from mental schemas rich with information about what has worked in the past, and which is responsive to changing environments. All of the reviews in this special issue have

found evidence suggesting these processes are at work in the mind of the offender within the crime facilitative environments. We note the continuum of expertise in offenders redolent of expertise in general, and highlight the idea of encouraging offenders to use expertise related skills such as enhanced problem solving, in pro-social ways. We note the significant gaps in knowledge that this issue has illuminated in relation to practice, consciousness and individual differences, and suggest that research using simulations may make a considerable contribution to understanding offending behavior.

Keywords: offending behavior; dysfunctional expertise; prosocial competency; simulation research

As we prepare the final drafts of the articles for this issue, we hope that readers will agree this has been a stimulating and worthwhile endeavor. As psychologists and criminologists working in the field of corrections, one of our uppermost aims is to understand more clearly the proximal processes - decision-making, emotions, and behavior - in the days, hours, and minutes leading up to the crime, the commission of the crime, and immediately after the crime. Clearer knowledge of these processes has the potential to dramatically improve our approach to situational crime prevention and rehabilitation. Understanding the goal and reward structure that drives repeated offending could also give us tools with which to potentially prevent young people becoming involved in crime. Moreover, it might be possible to encourage offenders to use expertise related skills such as enhanced problem solving, in pro-social ways, and to assist them to develop alternative strategies with which to achieve valued personal goals such as mastery or social status.

This special issue has reviewed what is known about offence related psychological processes so far, in a variety of criminal behaviors, using an innovative perspective that has considerable potential for providing new insights i.e. the expertise paradigm. The expertise theoretical framework has rarely been applied to research on offending behavior (barring a few notable exceptions), resulting in a surfeit of deficit oriented accounts of the etiology of crime. There has been a marked lack of attention to offence related competencies, which is a little odd in our view. A notable feature of an expertise paradigm is that it allows us to assess the psychological processes involved in experienced decision-making in a relatively precise and micro-analytical way, in both deviant and non deviant contexts.

In the introductory article (Nee & Ward, this issue), we reviewed some of the basic tenets of the expertise paradigm and the strong scientific evidence and theory that underpin it. We also drew together complementary strands of knowledge regarding conscious and unconscious decision-making from mainstream cognitive psychology and attempted to weave these together into a model of 'dysfunctional expertise'. In our opinion, an integrated research approach such as this might offer the beginnings of an explanatory tool for offending behavior proximal to the scene of the crime. In a nutshell, expert decision-making involves the increasingly fast and automatic recognition, over time and repeated exposure, of environmental cues relevant to a domain of expertise. In turn, these cues trigger a range of routine and habitual behavioral scripts, rapidly and unconsciously chosen from mental schemas rich with information about what has worked in the past, and which is responsive to changing environments. It is reasonable to say that all of the reviews in this special issue have found evidence suggesting these processes are at work in the mind of the offender within the crime facilitative environments.

The bulk of research reviewed in this special issue was not carried out with an examination of expertise in mind. Research regarding some types of offense such as burglary (see Nee, this issue) and child sex offending (see Fortune et al, this issue) have led the way in employing this approach in recent years and have begun to furnish us with empirical evidence for some parts of the offense decision-chain. Other reviews, on both acquisitive (see Vieraitis et al, this issue on identity theft) and violent offending (see Day & Bowen on IPV perpetrators; Brookman on homicide; O'Ciardha on rape, this issue) and those that involve both aspects (firesetting, Butler & Gannon, this issue); car-jacking (Topalli et al., this issue) and drug-related crime (Casey, this issue), provide evidence of situational

awareness, rapid decision-making, and superior enactment of the offense allowing optimal reward and avoidance of detection, in their most experienced offenders. O’Ciardha notes the lack of research of this type in perpetrators of rape, but the evidence of offence-supportive beliefs and implicit theories surrounding the offense in some offenders. Day and Bowen, and Fortune et al strongly suggest it is the most coercive and controlling subset of interpersonally violent offenders that exhibit expertise, have better emotion regulation and detection avoidance strategies, and have the most entrenched and embedded schemas, a view echoed in Brookman’s article on homicide. Many articles highlight the *heterogeneity* of offenders within offense types, and the new insights provided on firesetters (Butler & Gannon) demonstrate how particular psychological vulnerabilities result in varying prototypical trajectories and hence varying expertise and supportive scripts. It is interesting that more expert identity thieves (Vieraitis et al) and child molesters (Fortune et al) appear to have an extra level of deliberative planning and interpersonal skill alongside their more automatic situational awareness of vulnerability cues, compared to, for instance, burglars (Nee) and carjackers (Topalli et al) who rely more on the latter. All of these issues require further examination, which will hopefully yield valuable information for the reduction of criminal behavior.

All reviews in the special issue note a continuum of expertise in offenders redolent of the mainstream expertise paradigm (Chi, 2006), suggesting that experienced offenders have the most automatic, entrenched and resistant schemata, making them more resistant to change. This issue, plus the heterogeneity noted *within* offender types, begs for better case formulation and responsivity during assessment if therapeutic engagement and risk reduction is to be effective (Gannon & Ward, in press). As importantly noted by Casey in this

issue (and underlined by Huang & Bargh (2014) and Kahneman (2011)), the competitive nature of conscious and entrenched unconscious thought within an individual is one reason why negative outcomes often occur even in offenders strongly motivated to change. Casey asks for a paradigm shift in rehabilitation, and the research reviewed in the special issue and elsewhere strongly supports this suggestion.

Running alongside these positive developments, however, much research needs to be done. As is often the case, the special issue has left us with a myriad of unanswered, and often, unformulated, research questions. An expertise perspective offers a successful and robust paradigm and many potential methodologies with which to direct further work on the factors mediating offending behavior. Thoughts and emotions can be difficult to capture in situ, and a triangulation of methodologies that have worked in the past (Nee, 2010) plus the incisive experimental techniques used in expertise research more generally (see Nee & Ward, this issue), are advocated. Experimental methods often give enhanced insight as they have the capacity to measure the speed and observe the nature of the behavior that results from extremely fast decision-making and emotion, and can assess verbalizations post hoc as well (see Nee et al, in press for an example). To that end, research using simulations which can reinstate the context, though in their infancy, may make a considerable contribution to understanding offending behavior.

This special issue has highlighted many gaps in the crime jigsaw. To begin with, for each offense type we need to know more about the level of practice needed for the development of skill in different sub-sets of offenders; about levels of consciousness along the decision-chain; and about varying individual and environmental features that contribute to expertise alongside practice. We hope that reading this special issue has convinced

readers that adopting the expertise paradigm will be fruitful in furthering these goals, and ultimately, in reducing crime.

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