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Honour among thieves? How morality and rationality influence the decision-making processes of convicted domestic burglars

Abstract

Gaining the offender perspective is central to understanding domestic burglary, and is well documented. This paper presents findings from 30 semi-structured interviews with convicted domestic burglars conducted in Greater Manchester, United Kingdom. The findings support the dominant supposition that domestic burglars operate within a bounded rationality, broadly calculating reward and risk in the commission of their offences. In addition, it was found that a sense of abstracted morality impacted on decision-making. Burglars used cognitive 'codes of practice' which influenced target appraisal, shaped modus operandi, guided the search process, and impacted on items stolen. The findings suggest that the role of neutralization techniques and morality should be (re)incorporated into the understanding of domestic burglars as rational offenders.[1]

Introduction

There has been considerable development in understanding burglars' decision-making processes and behaviours and there is now ample evidence to suggest that burglars undergo a process of target appraisal which is rational, discriminating and skilful. Drawing upon extensive interviews with convicted domestic burglars (and a small proportion of self-confessed but unconvicted burglars) it has been asserted that 'in comparison with novices… tasks are carried out speedily and methodically, and recognition of relevant stimuli or cues is extremely fast, if not instantaneous' (Nee and Meenaghan, 2006: 935). It is now widely recognised that burglars operate using 'the same bounded, almost habitual decision-making processes that all experienced individuals use to navigate quickly and effectively around their world' (Ibid, 2006: 936). Importantly, this does not involve time-consuming weighing up of the pros and cons of each potential target, but rather it relies on speedy 'rules of thumb' based on prior learning and experience (Cornish and Clarke, 1985: 100; Nee and Meenaghan, 2006; Snook, Dami and Kavanagh, 2010). Research indicates that although the majority of burglaries result from the exploitation of opportunity (rather than the meticulous planning of how to overcome potential obstacles), burglars utilise their highly tuned sensitivity to identify criminal opportunities in situations where others might not (Cromwell, 1991). Shover (1971) describes burglars as possessing 'an alert optimism' which Cromwell

[1] The research also produced extensive findings on the key factors that can encourage desistance and reduce reoffending which will be presented in further papers.

(1991: 291) claims 'allows them to rapidly recognise and take advantage of potential criminal opportunities'.

The interplay of rationality and morality

Rational choice theory permeates a multitude of disciplines (Scott, 2000). In criminology rational choice theorists assert that in its simplest form, the rational criminal will execute the course of action that maximises gain whilst minimising risk and the potential for loss (Becker, 1968; Cornish and Clarke, 1986). Offending is the outcome of 'broadly rational choices based on analyses of anticipated costs and benefits' (Cornish and Clarke, 1986: vi). Subsequent theorists have refined, and somewhat tapered, the rational choice theory to account for judgmental heuristics enabling offenders to respond economically and swiftly to a raft of visual cues and complex tasks. When applied to domestic burglars, it has been claimed that criminal decision-making is best understood through a limited or what Simon (1983) termed 'bounded rationality' (later supported by Johnson and Payne, 1986; Bennet and Wright, 1984; Nee and Meenaghan, 2006; Opp, 1997; amongst others) whereby the decision to commit a crime is based on imperfect or incomplete information, informed guesses or "good enough" strategies (Cromwell, Olson and Avary, 1991).

From a cognitive processing perspective, research has demonstrated that domestic burglars derive visual cues from the environment to discriminate between potential targets based on a weighing up of risk and reward. These visual cues include signifiers of affluence, occupancy, ease of access, security and surveillability (Bernasco and Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Nee and Meenaghan, 2006; Rengert and Wasilchick, 1985). The perception of what constitutes the cognitive processes of rational offenders has become narrowed over recent years as successive studies have increasingly focused on target appraisal through the lens of a risk-reward dichotomy. However, limiting rational calculations to a duality of concerns, overlooks phenomenological considerations that also influence the decision-making process. It has produced a rather simplistic and 'sterile view' (Jacobs, 2010: 514) of offenders' reasoning. Whilst perceptions of risk and reward are indeed key considerations, the burglars in this study revealed that their judgments were also influenced by a self-constructed moral compass about victims, which houses could be targeted and what items could be stolen.

To better understand morality amongst burglars, it is useful to draw upon the work of Gresham Sykes and David Matza who in 1957 published their seminal article, 'Techniques of Neutralization' in which they argued that delinquents use rationalizations to enable

themselves to engage in criminal behaviour. Their propositions are themselves built upon Edwin Sutherland's (1947) theory of *Differential Association* which contends that individuals engage in deviant behaviour when they are exposed to and internalise 'an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law'. Inscribed in these 'definitions' are rationalisations for deviancy which play an important role in the genesis of criminal behaviour. Individuals draw upon neutralization techniques to protect his or her self-concept whilst committing delinquent acts (Costello, 2000), enabling them to 'drift' (Matza, 1964) in and out of delinquency whilst maintaining a general commitment to the prevailing societal values of 'right' and 'wrong'. Sykes and Matza (1957) proposed five techniques of neutralisation; denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. In review of the literature, Cromwell and Thurman (2003) identified a further five techniques; defense of necessity (Klockars, 1974), metaphor of the ledger (Minor, 1981), denial of the necessity of the law, the claim that everybody else is doing it and the claim of entitlement (Coleman, 1994). In their empirical research with shoplifters, they also identified a further two categories of neutralization: 'justification by comparison' and 'postponement' (Cromwell and Thurman, 2003).

Despite the original formulation of the rational choice perspective in criminology (Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Cornish and Clarke, 1986) containing an element of justifications and excuse making, and Clarke and Homel (1997) adding 'rationalizations' as a fourth rational choice category (building upon Clarke's 1992 three categories), this aspect of the theory has largely been ignored by those studying domestic burglars in recent years. Where moral reasoning has been taken into account in studies on domestic burglary, it is relegated to being post-burglary intimations designed to justify the offence retrospectively.

The findings in this paper demonstrate that burglars are indeed rational offenders but in addition to calculations using a risk/reward dichotomy, they draw upon neutralisation techniques to construct a self-schema that is moralistic and conscientious. Through the development of complex moral codes burglars are able to navigate cognitive dissonance and dampen conflict between their self-concept as a moral person and their morally reprehensible behaviours. Explicating how morality interplays with the rational decision-making of domestic burglars is important to further understand this offence type. In particular, the burglars' cognitive 'codes of practice' influenced target appraisal, modus operandi, search patterns, and the items that they stole.

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Methodology

The research adopted a multi-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. This paper focuses on the findings generated by semi-structured interviews with 30 convicted burglars. The research was inductive and driven by the explicit objective to gain insight in to the rise in burglary from the perspective of recently active burglars in Greater Manchester.

The interviewees were drawn from Greater Manchester Probation Trust's (GMPT) caseload in May 2010.[2] Key to being included in the sample was a conviction for burglary dwelling between 1st August 2007 and 31st December 2009. Given the changing nature of burglary in Greater Manchester (see Jackson, cited in Keegan, 2011), it was essential that recently active burglars formed the research sample. Participants were selected using non-probability sampling stratified by age and number of burglary convictions in court (see Figure 1.).

[*Insert Table 1. About here*]

Consideration was given to the location of offence and the occupation of the victim to ensure that burglary hotspots and different victims, such as students and elderly victims, were included in the sample.[3]

Fifteen of the interviews took place in the community (thirteen at GMPT probation offices and two at GMPT-managed 'approved premises'). Given the seriousness of domestic burglary and the fact that the project required consultation with recently active burglars, 15 interviews took place in custody (ten in HMP Forestbank and five in HMP Manchester). All interviews were conducted face to face. Twenty of the interviews were audio recorded with the prior written permission of the interviewee (and prison where relevant), and fully transcribed verbatim. Hand written notes were taken for the ten interviews conducted in HMP Forestbank as the request to take an audio recorder into the prison was declined on grounds of security. Whilst the majority of material was captured in the interview via shorthand, it is

[2] Domestic burglary has been increasing in Greater Manchester since June 2008 with a slight, and temporary, decline in February 2009. In 2008/09 there were 23,719 recorded burglary offences. This represents an increase of 2,178 (10%) compared to the previous 12 months.
[3] These characteristics were selected in consultation with Greater Manchester Police as the commissioners of this work.

recognised that not all findings were verbatim. Quotations from these ten interviews are typically short reflecting the fact that full detailed responses were impossible to capture word for word. Thematic analysis was used to categorise the data and organize the findings.

It is perhaps expedient at this juncture to point out that the interviews were inductive and explored a broad range of topics including target selection, items stolen, the onset of criminal behaviour and desistance. Morality emerged as a strong theme following analysis of the transcripts and it became apparent that the burglars drew upon a range of neutralization techniques to negate their iniquity. It is recognised that had the research been deductive and explicitly focused upon justifications and rationality there is the potential that more techniques of neutralization will have been uncovered. This presents a possible avenue for future research in this field. The issues and limitations arising are considered further in the discussion section.

Participants

The 30 interviewees had a total of 353 burglary dwelling convictions in the four years prior to interview, with a further 212 burglaries taken into consideration ('TIC'd') at court, amounting to 565 burglary dwelling offences; an average of 19 burglary convictions per offender. The participants were asked to estimate the number of burglaries that they had committed in their lifetime. Three individuals declined to answer (incidentally with convictions for 5, 15 and 17 domestic burglaries). The remaining 27 individuals estimated that between them they had committed 3394 domestic burglaries. Although caution should be used when taking these estimates at face value, it indicates the experience credentials of these burglars, and that a large proportion of burglaries go undetected or unsolved.

Findings

The findings are presented in a sequential order exploring offender motivations, target selection, modus operandi, and room searches, drawing out the cognitive interplay of bounded rationality and morality. Overall, it was found that of the 12 techniques of neutralization that have been identified in the literature, the 30 burglars in this study alluded to six of them; denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, defense of necessity and justification by comparison.

Offender Motivations and Target selection

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Findings from ethnographic studies have largely concluded that the majority of burglars are driven by material profit (Cromwell, Olsen and Avary, 1991; Maguire and Bennett, 1982; Reppetto, 1974;). Obtaining money, and quickly, was the primary motivation for all of the burglars in this study except one[4]. The money was used for a variety of different purposes but the main one exposited, in true anomic fashion, was to support a modus vivendi that was beyond the individual's means. The desire for money was to maintain what was described as a 'fast', 'expensive', 'partying' lifestyle that could not be sustained through legitimate means, inferring a self-perception of relative deprivation rather than absolute. Money generated by burglary was used to buy 'nice clothes', 'new trainers' or to spend on 'fashion':

> I did it for the money, the lifestyle. To buy alcohol, go to parties, clubbing. Nothing else. (Age 21)
>
> Money – I needed it for everything – clothes, beer, just my lifestyle really. (Age 24).
>
> I needed the money to buy cigarettes, weed - just every day things – new clothes, trainers (Age 25).

Previous studies have argued that the motivation for money results in the rational burglar's target selection primarily focusing on affluent neighbourhoods (e.g. Bernasco and Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Wright and Decker, 1994). The findings in this study indicated that a preference for affluent areas was hinged on an abstracted notion of morality rather than the prospect of elevated rewards. 'Denial of injury' and 'denial of victim' were both apparent neutralization techniques used to argue that the victims could afford it or that there were no real victims. There was also an apparent Robin Hood-syndrome whereby the offenders claimed that they were stealing from the rich to assist the poor (themselves in this instance):

> I got nicked up in 'Affluent Area'[5] because I used to think they were rich and I was poor and to me that justified it. I didn't feel as bad, they have millions anyway. (Interview 14: Age 21)
>
> I would go for richer houses. I don't do council… When I said that to my Probation officer she said I was trying to justify what I was doing, but that's the way I see it (Interview 17: Age 39).

[4] One individual stated that the only motivating factor for the one burglary he was convicted of was to assist an associate in a revenge attack on the victim. It was reported that there was no intent to remove items from the property.
[5] Names of locations have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Denial of injury was a common theme amongst the burglars targeting affluent areas and focused on the possession of extensive insurance premiums and ample wealth negating any real monetary losses. It was asserted that victims actually gained from burglary themselves by claiming recompense for items that hadn't been taken, or overestimating the value of their possessions that had been stolen:

> "The jewellery was worth thousands", that's what they say in court anyway. I can't really stand up and say it wasn't worth that much. Even the victims try and make a profit on you. They say things have gone when they haven't. They are as bad as us. (Interview 14: Age 21).

> I did one house and took about £200 worth of stuff and it went to court and they said I'd stolen about 13 grands [£13,000] worth of stuff. It's for the insurance. What can I do about it? […] half of the stuff I've never took but they just think they will get something back. It affects the sentence you are given. They are committing a crime as well - fraud. (Interview 12: Age 42)

These justifications fit neatly into the 'condemnation of the condemners' neutralization technique whereby the offender 'shifts the focus of attention from his own deviant acts to the motives and behavior of those who disapprove of his violations' (Sykes and Matza, 1957: 668). The burglars divert attention to the victims who are cast as hypocritical and devious; 'by attacking others, the wrongfulness of his own behavior is more easily repressed or lost to view' (Ibid.). Rather than seeing victims of crime the burglars see 'beneficiaries' of burglary and uses this 'denial of the victim' technique in conjunction with condemnation to maintain a moral position.

The burglars that targeted the more affluent houses saw themselves as being more akin with 'master criminals' and glamorised their offences as being discriminating, meticulous and skilful. This was often articulated by juxtaposing ones' crimes with those committed by drug affected criminals. Participants were eager to distance themselves from high risk, low reward burglaries which they claimed were committed by intravenous drug users in need of a 'quick fix'. For example, one individual commented: 'Smack heads wouldn't come round here, they do council estates' (Interview 14: Age 21). Burglars motivated by heroin addiction were seen as unskilled, clumsy, generating little reward and not really understanding the 'art' of

burglary. Cromwell and Thurman (2003) identified that shoplifters utilize 'justification by comparison' to counter their illicit activities. Offenders maintain their self-image through the moral opprobrium of acts committed via a different modus operandi to their own. In essence offenders claim that they 'could be worse or are not as bad as some others' (Cromwell and Thurman, 2003: 546). This was clearly apparent amongst the cohort of offenders.

Modus operandi

Indicating the speed of target appraisal, offenders estimated that the suitability of a house could be determined in a matter of seconds. Some even suggested that it was 'instant'[6], supporting the view of the expert rational burglar (Nee and Meenaghan, 2006; Snook, Dami and Kavanagh, 2010). This section explores the burglars' specific offence chain, starting with the preferences for occupancy, before looking at the modus operandi employed by the burglars and the rooms entered once inside the property.

Occupancy

Occupancy is a key determining factor in the decision to target a property (see for example, Bennett and Wright, 1984; Rengert and Wasilchick, 2000; Snook, Dhami and Kavanagh, 2010). The majority (93%) of Cromwell, Olson and Avary's (1993) sample reported that they would never purposely enter an occupied property, and 76% of Nee and Meenaghan's (2006) cohort preferred the property to be unoccupied at the time of the offence. Findings regarding occupancy in this study were mixed. As rational offenders, the burglars were aware of the relatively inflated rewards associated with a victim being at home (the increased likelihood of items such as handbags, wallets, and car keys in the property), but were also mindful of the escalated risk.

Numerous visual cues were used to determine and corroborate occupancy, including checking to see if lights were on, curtains drawn, or if milk and mail had been delivered but not collected from the doorstep. Most of the burglars described using 'occupancy tests' to ascertain if anyone is at home. Techniques for checking occupancy were similar to those found in other studies (e.g. Nee and Meenaghan, 2006), whereby the offender knocks on the front door of the property and waits to see if someone answers. If somebody did, the

[6] Only one offender described taking time to monitor a property for any duration. This was because his chosen approach was specific in that he would identify a commercial premises and follow the owners to their houses to steal the takings.

offender would ask directions to a location nearby, or ask for somebody using a common name. The prospective burglar would then leave in the direction of the location, or apologise when told that they had the wrong address. In a Goffmanesque dramaturgical display, one individual stated that he collected leaflets from the local fast food outlet to use as props which he would deliver to occupants if they answered the door:

> Sometimes I'd knock on [the door], I'd have grabbed a load of leaflets out of the Chinese and if they answer I would give them one and if they didn't answer you would know no one was in. (Interview 14; Age 21).

The occupancy tests continued on desirable targets until an empty property was found. This sequential search approach has been highlighted in previous research (Bennett and Wright, 1984; Nee and Meenaghan, 2006; Snook, Dhami and Kavanagh, 2010), although it was recognised by burglars in this study that this approach could heighten the risk:

> You are taking a big chance because if [...] someone answers and then there is a burglary nearby, the police knock on all the other doors and ask have they seen anything suspicious. They say "oh yes I've seen this man" [...] The police have all the known burglar's faces and they can just point him out. It's a bit risky but a lot of people do that [occupancy tests] who don't like going into houses when people are in. (Interview 14; Age 21).

However, Snook, Dhami and Kavanagh (2010) report that burglars can predict occupancy 'beyond chance levels', thereby delimiting potential risk. In this respect the occupancy check becomes a final confirmation once all other visual cues have indicated a vacant property.

A key determinant in target selection was whether there was a car parked on the driveway (similarly found by Bennett and Wright, 1984; Snook, Dhami and Kavanagh, 2010). Research has found that this was the most important cue in burglar's decision-making, but importantly was also the most 'ecologically valid or predictive of actual occupancy' (Snook, Dhami and Kavanagh, 2010). In this study, the presence of a vehicle in the driveway of a property was not always viewed as a deterrent. Burglars primarily motivated to steal car keys (so called 'Hanoi burglaries') perceived the presence of a (desirable) vehicle on the driveway as an opportunity rather than a deterrent. There is a growing trend towards car thieves becoming house burglars to obtain car keys in order to overcome immobilisers and

sophisticated anti-theft devices. According to the Home Office 2009/10 statistical bulletin (2010), car keys were stolen in 9% of residential burglaries with entry. This has important implications for understanding burglar's decision-making in terms of occupancy as it is in contrast to the findings reported in previous research studies such as Bennett and Wright (1984), Logie, Wright and Decker, (1992) and Nee and Meenhagen (2006) and highlights the fluidity of cues used in burglar's decision-making.

Following on from occupancy preferences, research demonstrates that a large number of burglars offend during the day when it is more likely that the property is unoccupied (for example see; Rengert and Wasilchick, 2000; Cromwell, 1991; Mawby, 2001). In Greater Manchester just over a third of burglaries (34%; n=4386) are committed during the typical working hours of 0900 and 1700 hours. Whereas Cromwell (1991) reports that night time burglars are usually acquainted with their victims and take advantage of knowing that they are away from home, the night time burglars in this study generally preferred the residents to be at home and asleep in bed. The participants described two main reasons for this. The first reason pertained to being apprehended; if the householders were asleep upstairs, some burglars felt reassured that they weren't going be disturbed:

> [I prefer] midnight to early morning because no one is around and everyone is in bed so you wouldn't be surprised by them coming through the door. (Interview 23: Age 22).

> [I prefer] early hours of the morning, between midnight and 5 in the morning. Most people are in a deep sleep. (Interview 27: Age 26).

Similar findings have been presented by Nee and Meenaghan (2006), although only by a minority of their participants; ten (20 percent) of their cohort reported that they preferred the property to be occupied so long as the residents were asleep. The second reason related to the potential rewards from the burglary. If the residents were at home, burglars reported being more likely to find items of value inside such as handbags, wallets and keys. This provides support for the perception of domestic burglars as rational offenders explicit in their need to delimit risk whilst maximising gain. Targeting properties that were unoccupied at the time of the offence provided 'justification by comparison' (Cromwell and Thurman, 2003) for one burglar who stated that he 'would never go into someone's house when they were in' because 'it's bad enough going in when they aren't there' (Interview 14: Age 21).

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Bogus callers and Distraction burglars

Analysis of distraction burglary[7] incidents found that offenders use a range of tactics to gain entry into people's homes (Lister, Wall & Bryan, 2004). One of the most common guises adopted is that of an official, in many cases, an employee of a utility company or council worker, police officer or domestic contractor. Alternatively, the offender may pretend to be a person in an emergency or in need of help. In 2003/04, there were 15,113 recorded incidents of distraction burglary in England and Wales comprising 4% of total incidents. Greater Manchester was below this national average with 2.1% of recorded burglary dwelling being distraction burglaries in the same period (Ruparel, 2004).

The interviews included two individuals that had committed distraction burglaries. One individual stated that he 'had tried it once' by asking an elderly man to help look for a ball in the back garden. However, he stated that the relatively high risks associated with this crime type made him realise that it wasn't his 'cup of tea' (Interview 8: Age 22), indicating the experimentalism that is often employed by domestic burglars to develop and hone their skills. Another participant was explicit in the interview about this technique being his preferred MO:

> That's the main way that I got in [to houses]. I had a girl doing it with me. She would keep them talking at the door by saying she was looking for someone in the area [...] I've done a number of them over the years. All the same sort of thing. Having a female go to the door – there is more trust there. (Interview 26: Age 39).

This individual claimed to have committed approximately 1000 burglaries, and many of them using the approach outlined above. There is ample evidence to suggest that co-offenders commit more crimes than solo offenders, and potentially the presence of others elicits a more high risk approach (e.g. Andresen and Felson, 2010; Carrington, 2009; Felson, 2009).

'Justification by comparison' was evident once again amongst the cohort of burglars in their collective and resolute condemnation of distraction burglars. There was a consensus

[7] Distraction burglary is considered as any crime where a falsehood, trick or distraction is used on an occupant of a dwelling to gain, or try to gain, access to the premises to commit burglary (Home Office Counting Rules for Recorded Crime 28.2).

amongst the other 29 burglars (including one individual that had 'tried it' mentioned above) that distraction burglaries were 'disgusting' and 'wrong', and the perpetrators of such offences were 'scumbags', 'sick' and 'twisted'. The basis of this was that the majority of these offences were committed against old people and typically involved direct contact with the victim:

> [They're] scum. If I looked at a house and it had all old things in it and it looked like an old person's house I wouldn't go in. There's no point in burgling an old woman. It's not right. (Interview 30: Age 28).

> Bogus caller?! That's bangers. That's sick. Targeting old women. That's wrong, proper low. (Interview 6: Age 21).

One burglar was explicit in their possession of a moral compass that guided their actions. Despite having committed numerous burglaries, they were clear that they managed to retain a sense of morality:

> It's wrong if it's old people. People that do stuff like that are out of order. I wouldn't like it done to my grandma or granddad so I won't do that to old people. I still might have done all these things [crimes] but I still have morals. (Interview 27: Age 26).

Similarly:

> I do tend to stay away from the old people's houses. It's the elderly isn't it, I wouldn't do that. (Interview 12: Age 42).

> I went in a house once and an old woman was up in her bed. I felt like a tramp, I've never felt so bad in all my life. I just walked down stairs and shut the door behind me. I never took anything. Seeing her there it made me feel horrible. (Interview 17: Age 39)

Sykes and Matza (1957: 665) outlined that offenders 'often draw a sharp line between those who can be victimized and those who cannot' and that certain social groups are not considered 'fair game'. In this study, the elderly and children fell into these categorisations of being 'off limits' to the majority of domestic burglars. Importantly, this moral code

prospectively influenced target appraisal. There was consensus that visual cues enabled a burglar to quickly identify houses with elderly residents, and this cue would override all others in their assessment of its desirability to burgle.

Many of the participants contrasted their modus operandi with what they perceived to be the relatively irrational and high risk burglaries committed by drug addicts, who they believed were to blame for these particularly abhorrent burglaries. Similar findings were found by Cromwell and Thurman (2003) in their research on the neutralization techniques utilized by shoplifters.

It became apparent that the majority of burglars had a shared view of a domestic burglary moral hierarchy as depicted in Figure 2. Burglaries committed whilst the occupant was away from the property were the least immoral, whereas those that involved direct contact with the victim were, not surprisingly, viewed as being the most immoral.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

One burglar also alluded to an offence moral hierarchy whereby certain types of crime were viewed as more moral than others, stating: 'Burglary is […] a trampy way of making money. Even my mum says she wishes I'd robbed a bank' (Interview 14: Age 21). This illustrates that criminal career choice has implications for the moral self-schema of offenders, with some crime types being more amenable to justification to one's self (and family).

Gaining entry and inside the property: Search patterns and room selection

Aside from distraction burglars, and those who go 'fishing', the majority of burglars described accessing the property from the rear because of the relative lack of natural surveillance. This is supported by previous research (Hearnden and Magill, 2004). Burglar's expertise continues once inside the property and enables them to quickly navigate targets, maximising gain and minimising the time, effort and risk involved. Wright and Decker (1994) interviewed over 80 active burglars, 93% reported that they went straight to the master bedroom to locate cash, jewellery and other small valuable items. Supporting this finding and similar ones presented by Nee and Meenaghan (2006), a cohort of burglars in this study similarly focused their efforts on the master bedroom:

> It's straight up the stairs to the master bedroom – get the jewellery box. You get all the small stuff that you can run off with first. (Interview 17: Age 39).

> [Straight to] the master bedroom. I would be looking for gold, money, just go for the jewellery box and look in the drawers. After that I would hit the front room – you've got your electrical stuff in there – laptops, plasmas, digital cameras, handbags. Everything. (Interview 16: Age 30).

Although most burglars didn't identify a specific pattern to their search, there were some rooms that were perceived to be more profitable than others, as well as some areas or rooms that were avoided. The kitchen was regarded as a particularly good place to find valuables as often handbags, wallets, keys, mobile phones and small electronic items such as Ipods or MP3 players could be found here. The fridge was reported to be a common hiding place for valuables, as well as wardrobes, under mattresses and in bedroom drawers in the master bedroom:

> Normally the kitchen, you find things in odd places – wallets in the fridge so you just open the fridge and see if there is anything there. Same with ovens, and under carpets. (Interview 27: Age 26).

> A lot of people keep money in the fridge. I've found money in the fridge twice. Also behind pictures and things (Interview 28: Age 18).

In a similar vein to targeting properties in which elderly individuals resided, the majority of burglars stated that they would never go in a child's bedroom or steal items that clearly belong to a child. This provides further support for Sykes and Matza's (1957) assertions that there are implicit maxims that are adhered to a by domestic burglars. Along with the elderly, young people were not regarded as valid targets of burglary and therefore their bedrooms and possessions should be avoided.

> I won't take anything off the kids. I know it's bad but if it's a car they are insured for it. (Interview 21: Age 21).

> I would never do it [burgle a house] if kids were there (Interview 14: Age 21).

It is clear that the imposition of these self-regulated moral codes is a mechanism by which offenders can justify and downplay their actions whilst maintaining their self-schema.

All of the interviewees were unemployed at the time that they committed the majority of their offences, and many reported leaving secondary school with few or no qualifications. For some the difficulty in obtaining paid employment was used to neutralize their illicit activities:

> The recession was on and I was in the job centre every day and there wasn't a job in sight. People couldn't get work and they had qualifications. It's really hard. It's impossible. (Interview 14: Age 21).

The individual here alludes to macro forces that despite their best efforts towards lawful activity they were unable to comply. This resonates with Sykes and Matza's 'denial of responsibility', as well as Coleman's (1998) 'defense of necessity' in which the offender attempts to reduce guilt and culpability by claiming that circumstances beyond their control necessitated the criminal act.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented demonstrate that in addition to reading visual cues, burglars' decision-making is governed by a self-styled moral code that places parameters on modus operandi, targets and items stolen. The offenders draw upon moral relativism to juxtapose their offence with that of others in an attempt to make it appear less serious. It is clear that the imposition of these self-regulated moral codes were a mechanism by which offenders can justify and downplay their actions. Participants were eager to distance themselves from burglars committing high risk, low reward burglaries. These burglars were predominantly viewed as 'smackheads', or intravenous drug users in need of a 'quick fix' and therefore betraying the 'art' of burglary.

Importantly for understanding target selection the justifications that burglars used to rationalise their offences become tangled in the etiology and modus operandi of their criminal careers. That is not to say that neutralizations occur at the stage of Lemert's primary deviance, but rather they play an important role in maintaining persistence in crime as outlined by Hirschi (1969) and later by Maruna and Copes (2005). The findings provide evidence to suggest that a complex interplay of abstracted morality and illusory

professionalism impacts on decision-making *before* the burglary is commissioned and over time serves to shape the offender's particular offence chain. In this respect, the findings support Hirschi's (1969) claim that post-offence rationalization in one instance may become a neutralization technique in another.

The research was based upon 30 interviews with convicted domestic burglars. There are of course questions regarding the reliability and validity of the findings. Steps were taken to corroborate information with factual data from GMPT's Offender Assessment System ('OASys') to validate the claims made by participants. In addition Offender Managers, some of which had worked with the participant for many years, were engaged with to determine offence characteristics. It was largely found that once assured of confidentiality and anonymity most interviewees welcomed the opportunity to talk about their perspectives, strategies and offending skills with a researcher. Some reported that it was cathartic, others described it as their opportunity to make amends for the things they had done, whereas some participants became animated and excitable when discussing their competence and the skills they had mastered. A similar willingness to detail offences to a researcher was reported by Matthews (2002) in relation to interviewing convicted armed robbers in England.

A potentially fruitful direction for further research would be to develop a typology of offenders by modus operandi, and map the relative importance and interpretation of different visual cues. For example, Hanoi burglars clearly require residents to be at home and the car to be parked close by and so they read these visual cues of occupancy in a positive light. However, daytime burglars prefer the occupants to be away from the property and so the presence of a car and activity in the residency return negative signals.

In conclusion, the majority of the Greater Manchester burglars claimed to be skilled in assessing the suitability of a target and used a highly honed judgement to assist them in selecting a property that was relatively low risk but high reward. The findings suggest that alongside a dichotomised calculation of risk and reward, domestic burglars construct a self-schema that is moralistic, skilled and rational. The notion of self impacts on decision-making, influencing, amongst other things, who can and cannot be targeted for victimization. In recognising this, further research is required to fully understand the neutralisation and justification processes that domestic burglars negotiate when engaged in illegal activities.

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Table 1. Research participants: Age and Convictions

	Age Group					
Number of burglary convictions	**<18 yrs**	**18-21 yrs**	**22-25 yrs**	**26-35 yrs**	**36 + yrs**	**Total**
1 to 10	1	6	6	2	1	16
11 to 25	1	5	1	2	3	12
26 +	0	1	0	1	0	2
TOTAL	2	12	7	5	4	30

Figure 1. Moral hierarchy of burglary modus operandi

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