

The Experience of Men Committing Arson in Northern Ireland

A qualitative study of context, development, motivation, and meaning

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Aims

- Explore participants **experience of arson**, & the **context and system** surrounding arson behaviour
- Centre the individual's perspective with an **exploratory paradigm**



Methods

Research question: How do men in Northern Ireland make sense of their arson convictions?

Participants: men 18+ under supervision of Probation Board of Northern Ireland for arson.

Design: Semi-structured interview & Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003).



Existing Literature: Classifying & Understand Arson & Firesetters

Single-Factor Theories

e.g. inductive typologies categorise by characteristics like motivation (Barnoux & Gannon, 2014)

Multi-Factor Theories

e.g. Multi-Trajectory Theory of Adult Firesetting (5 trajectories to firesetting) (Gannon, Ciardha et al., 2012)

Alternative Theories

e.g. Continuum of Fire Use Theory spectrum from non-criminalised to criminalised (Horsley, 2021)

What **differentiates firesetters** from other offenders are key **psychological and psychiatric characteristics** (Gannon et al., 2013; Tyler et al., 2015)

Existing research (largely quantitative retrospective analysis of clinical & legal data) is **reductionist** and de-centres the individual, leaving **insufficient evidence for formulation-based treatments** (Cunningham et al., 2011)

Substance misuse is increasingly prominent (Jayaraman & Frazer, 2006) **Mental illness**, particularly delusions, psychosis, paranoia and depression (Ritchie & Huff, 1999)

Men in Northern Ireland may have a **unique cultural script for fire use** (Reilly et al., 2004) More likely to experience **social disadvantage** and mental illness (Ducat et al., 2013)



Findings

6 interviews were conducted. 9 Group Experiential Themes were Identified, & multiple subthemes.

"I was **homeless at the time**, so I was under a bit of pressure that way, plus the fact I was **drinking heavy**"

"I was **hearing voices** and I was experiencing things"

"if I smashed the window, there's a **chance of the dog or the baby getting cut**, and I couldn't live with that... so the car, when there's nobody near, I know it's their livelihood, but **they have another car**"

"West Belfast, you **seen cars on fire every day**"

"wee **warning**, kinda maybe a big warning"

Substance Use
Long History of Substance Use, Substance Use & Firesetting, Memory Loss, Impact on Other Areas of life, A Changed Relationship with Substance Use

Mental Health and Situational Stressors
Interpersonal Difficulties, Housing & Financial Difficulties, Mental Health

Regret, Growth, Change & Challenge
Regret, Growing Pains, & Ongoing Mental Health Issues

'I'm Not Really an Arsonist'
'Out of My Character', What it Means to be a 'True Arsonist'

The Many Goals of Arson
Sending a Message, A Practical Solution to Homelessness, Suicide, Intent vs Impact

How do Men in Northern Ireland Make Sense of their Arson Convictions?
Themes & Subthemes

Does the Punishment Fit The Crime?
Not Expecting the Consequences, Practicalities of Navigating an Arson Conviction, Personal Impact, Social Stigma

Justifying Firesetting Specifically
Easier, kinder, Powerful

Other Experiences with Fire
Non-Criminalised Fire Experiences, Other Experiences of Firesetting, Fire Normalisation within the context of Northern Ireland, Personal Fire Interest

Other Experiences with Criminal Behaviour
Other Experiences of the Criminal Justice System, Paramilitary Experiences

"it was **jealousy, rage and anger**, and then from a young age I was **always into lighting fires**"

"I'm **not even an arsonist** like, I just lit a fire"

"its **impacting me as much as its impacting other people** d'you know what I mean?"

"It **taught me a lot of lessons**"

"I've definitely **wised up**"

"if I'd been **sober** it probably **wouldn't have happened**"

"I'm **still getting punished** for it"

Conclusions & Clinical Implications

These men described **complicated and multi-faceted relationships with their firesetting behaviour**, which had **systemic ties to their psychosocial environment, culture, and mental health**. The variation across participants highlights the need for **treatment programmes which are adaptable and individualised**, with consideration of contextual factors such as mental health, coping with situational stressors, and systemic issues, such as housing, and **culture-specific factors such as normalisation of fire, and the influence of paramilitary threat and violence**.

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