

ADULT DELIBERATE FIRESSETTING

THEORY, ASSESSMENT,
AND TREATMENT

THERESA A. GANNON

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Adult Deliberate Firesetting

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For Tony Ward: Thanks for being a wonderful mentor.

Theresa A. Gannon

For my family: Thank you for encouraging me to listen and learn.

Nichola Tyler

Do Mathilde agus Maud.

Caoilte Ó Ciardha

*For my parents, Noreen and Gerald Alleyne, who encouraged me to take advantage
of every opportunity.*

Emma Alleyne

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About the Authors

Theresa A. Gannon, DPhil, CPsychol (Forensic), is a professor of forensic psychology and director of the Centre for Research and Education in Forensic Psychology (CORE-FP) at the University of Kent, UK. Theresa also works as a practitioner consultant forensic psychologist specialising in deliberate firesetting for the Forensic and Specialist Service Line, Kent and Medway Social Care and Partnership Trust, UK. Theresa has published over 150 chapters, articles, books, and other scholarly works in the areas of male- and female-perpetrated offending. She is particularly interested in the assessment and treatment of individuals who have set deliberate fires. In 2012, Theresa led the development of the first comprehensive theory of adult deliberate firesetting (named the Multi-Trajectory Theory of Adult Firesetting or M-TTAF). After leading a series of research studies examining the treatment needs of adult firesetters, Theresa developed the first standardised treatment programs for firesetters (the Firesetting Intervention Programme for Prisoners [FIPP] and Firesetting Intervention Programme for Mentally Disordered Offenders [FIP-MO]), which are now implemented in prisons and hospitals internationally. In 2016, Theresa was lead recipient of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC's) Outstanding Impact in Society Award for her theoretical work and treatment provision regarding deliberate firesetting.

Theresa is lead editor of several books, including *Aggressive Offenders' Cognition: Theory, Research, and Treatment* (2007: Wiley); *Female Sexual Offenders: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment* (2010: Wiley-Blackwell); and *Sexual Offending: Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation* (2017: Wiley-Blackwell). Theresa is also co-editor of several other books. Key examples include *Firesetting and Mental Health* (2012: Royal College of Psychiatrists); *What Works in Offender Rehabilitation: An Evidence-Based Approach to Assessment and Treatment* (2013: Wiley-Blackwell); and *The Psychology of Arson: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Managing Adult Deliberate Firesetters* (2015: Routledge).

Nichola Tyler, PhD, is a lecturer in forensic psychology at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Nichola completed her PhD in forensic psychology in 2015 at the University of Kent, UK. Both her PhD and post-doctoral research focused on understanding firesetting by adults with a diagnosed mental illness. Nichola now leads the Firesetting and Forensic Mental Health Lab (FFMH Lab) at Victoria University of Wellington, where she continues to conduct research on deliberate firesetting by both youth and adults. Nichola has published over 40 journal articles, book chapters, and

professional publications on the topics of deliberate firesetting, sexual offending, and rehabilitation. Nichola developed one of the first micro-theories of adult deliberate firesetting (the Firesetting Offence Chain for Mentally Disordered Offenders [FOC-MD]) and led the evaluation of the first standardised treatment programme for adults with a mental illness who have set deliberate fires (FIP-MO). On the basis of this work, she received the 2016 Kent and Medway NHS Trust Achievement in Research Award and was highly commended in the Early Career Researcher category in the 2016 Kent Innovation Awards. Alongside her academic roles, Nichola has experience of working in secure services with men and women who have set deliberate fires. She has also provided training to professionals internationally on understanding, assessing, and treating individuals with deliberate firesetting.

Caoilte Ó Ciardha, PhD, is a senior lecturer in forensic psychology at the University of Kent, UK. He completed his PhD in forensic cognitive psychology at Trinity College Dublin in 2010. His research focuses on the role and function of psychological factors in the aetiology of offending behaviours and in desistance from offending. Caoilte is particularly interested in models of offending that employ a social cognition framework. He works predominantly on the problems of sexual aggression and deliberate adult firesetting. Caoilte has published over 40 journal articles or other scholarly works on offending behaviour and holds associate editor positions at *Psychology, Crime and Law* and *Sexual Abuse*. In 2016, his research on adult firesetting was recognised as co-recipient of the ESRC's Outstanding Impact in Society Award. He is a regular contributor to television documentaries—typically in the Irish language—including *Finné: Scéal Martin Conmey*, winner of the Law Society of Ireland Justice Media Award for Human Rights/Social Justice Reporting 2019. Caoilte has received research funding from organisations, including the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abuse, the police, and UNICEF.

Emma Alleyne, PhD, is a reader in forensic psychology at the University of Kent, UK. She completed her BSc (honours) in psychology at McMaster University (Canada), followed by her MSc and PhD in forensic psychology at the University of Kent. Emma has published over 40 journal articles, book chapters, and government reports on the topics of gang-related violence, sexual offending, firesetting, and animal abuse. Her theoretical and empirical work broadly examines the social, psychological, and behavioural factors that explain various types of aggressive behaviour. Emma now leads a research programme on the aetiological factors associated with animal abuse. She has developed the first ever offence process model of animal abuse, highlighting the interactions between distal and proximal factors unique to this type of offending. Her more recent work has involved the use of innovative methods (e.g., cognitive tasks, virtual reality) to pursue research lines that investigate how offence-supportive attitudes predispose individuals to harm animals and the regulatory processes involved in triggering this type of offending behaviour. In addition to her research activities, Emma has experience working as a practitioner in secure settings delivering individual and group-based offending behaviour programmes.

Preface

When we first began examining the area of adult firesetting in the 2000s, writing a book on the topic would have been almost impossible. There was very little psychological theory or research and large gaps in our understanding of this topic. We are delighted to say that, since 2010—in particular because of the Gannon and Pina (2010) review on the topic—this picture has changed somewhat. In fact, it has changed so much that we have now been able to write a book on the topic. Our initial idea for this book stemmed from our training provision in the area of adult firesetting. We have been providing training on this topic since around 2011 and quickly realised that in order to give delegates a comprehensive overview of the topic, we had to piece together and disseminate varying sources (i.e., book chapters and journal articles). As the years have gone by, the absence of an authored book in this area has become more apparent. We sincerely hope that this book will fix this gap and promote momentum for theorists, researchers, and treatment providers who are working with adult-perpetrated firesetting. If readers take one message from this book, we hope it will be that future work in firesetting must be grounded in best practice scientific principles. This is an incredibly important field of research—a public health issue (Tyler et al., 2019a)—so it is vital that future research is well-planned and adequately powered to provide the field with the well-founded evidence and theoretical direction it requires.

*Theresa A. Gannon,
Nichola Tyler,
Caoilte Ó Ciardha,
and Emma Alleyne*

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1

Deliberate Firesetting

A Prevalent Yet Neglected Clinical Issue

Deliberate firesetting represents a major global public health issue (Tyler et al., 2019a). As such, criminal justice and mental health responses need to be aligned in order to be effective in reducing this type of (re)offending. The evidence base to inform prevention and intervention strategies has, until fairly recently, lacked robust, comparative designs to comprehensively capture whether individuals who set fires have unique characteristics that require tailored rehabilitation approaches. Further, aetiological theories, drawing on the limited evidence base, have typically lacked scope and explanatory power (see Hooker, 1987 or Ward et al., 2006). Likely driven by a recognition of the human cost of firesetting globally and the lack of literature outlining ways of working with this population, there has been a surge over the past decade in research outputs that rigorously and systematically addresses this gap in knowledge. With this surge have come methodological challenges. In this chapter, we review issues pertaining to definitional and measurement constraints. We also present the wider context in which firesetting literature is situated, highlighting some of the founding pillars on which recent research developments are based. The aim of this chapter is to introduce researchers and practitioners to the key concepts and disciplines that have shaped our current understanding of deliberate firesetting in adults.

Definitions, Terms, and Labels

Clear, consistently used terms and definitions enable developments in science and clinical practice alike. They also act as aide memoires to the varying motivations underpinning the aims and objectives of their use, whether it be for legal records and/or comparative research. To date, various terms have been used in the literature that refer to the deliberate and often criminal act of setting fires. *Arson*—most commonly defined as the intentional destruction of property, using fire, for unlawful purposes—is a legal term that is internationally recognised (Kolko, 2002; Williams, 2005). When used in research, *arson* typically refers to officially recorded incidents (e.g., charge, offence, conviction). As a result, research that adopts this term and definition is typically limited to known or documented incidents of fire. A further limitation is that the term *arson* does not account for people who are not convicted of arson despite having set deliberate fires (Dickens et al., 2012). Sometimes, for example, a deliberately set fire may not reach the burden of proof necessary for an arson conviction,

or the individual who set the fire may have escaped official detection by authorities. Clinicians often work with clients who disclose criminal behaviour not officially recorded. However, the behaviour, and its associated criminogenic factors, still warrant attention.

In the clinical context, the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) outlines a diagnosis of *pyromania* for individuals who (1) deliberately set fire on more than one occasion; (2) experience affective and/or physiological arousal prior to the firesetting incident; (3) exhibits a fascination with fire; (4) experiences pleasure, gratification, or relief when interacting with fire and/or its consequences. This diagnosis, however, is significantly constrained by exclusion criteria. In order to be diagnosed with pyromania, the firesetting cannot have been motivated by financial gain, socio-political ideology, revenge, or the desire to cover up other criminal behaviour or improve one's living situation. The firesetting must also not have occurred in the context of psychotic symptoms, intellectual impairment, or intoxication and should not be best explained by any other diagnoses (i.e., conduct disorder, mania, antisocial personality disorder). Given these constraints, it is unsurprising that pyromania diagnoses are very rare (Gannon & Pina, 2010; Ó Ciardha et al., 2017). Consequently, researchers have had limited ability to examine any possible pyromania aetiology. In fact, given the rarity of pyromania diagnoses, the utility of such a concept for researchers or treatment professionals is at best questionable.

The term *firesetting* or *fire setting* refers to any act of deliberately setting fire. This wide-ranging umbrella term is the domain within which clinicians typically operate. That is, the term *firesetting* captures varied motivations and clinical symptomatology, as well as incidents both officially and unofficially recorded. As such, the term *firesetting* is used throughout this book except when describing research that focusses specifically on one of the subset terms described earlier. The term *fire-raising* also appears in the literature, typically used synonymously with firesetting. While it was used frequently in some older sources—notably in some influential works by Prins and colleagues (e.g., Prins, 1994)—it appears to have fallen out of favour in more recent writing. This may be due to the verb *to set* being more frequently used in general speech than *to raise* when talking about starting fires. Additionally, fire-raising has a specific legal meaning in the Scottish legal system (i.e., similar to arson) and may therefore be best avoided in favour of *firesetting* when talking about the behaviour more broadly than its legal definition(s). As with fire-raising, the term *fire-starting* occasionally appears in the literature but less frequently than firesetting. In fact, this term appears to be more frequently used in research focusing specifically on the ignition of fires rather than the wider behaviour of setting deliberate fires. Using a single term consistently—in this case, *firesetting*—helps ensure that researchers can quickly identify relevant research when searching the literature.

It is worth noting that we use person-first language in this book when referring to individuals who have set deliberate fires, who have committed other crimes, or who have a psychological disorder. This reflects a change from how many authors, including ourselves, have written about these populations in the past but brings our use of language in line with a wider de-labelling movement in research and practice relating to offending behaviour (see Willis, 2018). In clinical settings, where the primary aim is to support individuals towards desistance, the use of labels—such as “firesetter” or “offender”—only serves to reinforce stigmatising attitudes (Imhoff, 2015). If the aim is indeed desistance, then the use

of these labels is not only counter-intuitive, but more important, it also violates ethical codes of practice. For example, the first principle of the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics (2018) is respect, and within this principle individuals adhering to the code should "value the dignity and worth of all persons" (p. 5). Using labels that refer to a person's past offending behaviour reduces the person's value to that of their previously negative behaviour and signals disrespect to others (e.g., employers and residential managers). For example, a practitioner working with an individual who is routinely labelled as "firesetter" could then be biased to assume the individual is likely to reoffend. These biases could influence professional decision-making regarding resettlement and reintegration opportunities. If a psychologist is meant to strive to do no harm, labelling directly contravenes this goal (Willis, 2018). It is with these core ethical principles in mind that this book actively avoids labelling the people at the heart of the rehabilitative process in order to respect their dignity and worth.

Prevalence of Deliberate Firesetting

How we define firesetting has an impact on the consistency, and sometimes validity, of how we measure its prevalence. As a result, the manner in which fire data and statistics are recorded and reported makes it difficult to establish the true prevalence of deliberate firesetting across countries (Meacham, 2020). Looking solely at conviction rates for *arson* offences would massively underestimate the scale of the problem given the low detection and clearance rates for deliberate firesetting (see Chapter 5). Additionally, in many countries, published crime statistics routinely combine criminal damage and arson offences, making it difficult to parse firesetting prevalence from other forms of property offences. From a researcher's perspective, not all data are publicly accessible or searchable by people who cannot speak the language of the reporting country if translations are not available.

Where data are available, estimates can vary wildly depending on the recording agency and the definitions used. When we examine data from the US, for example, the FBI suggest that there are approximately 13 or 14 wilfully set fires annually for every 100,000 inhabitants (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015, 2018b) where an investigation has determined the fire to be deliberate. However, numbers from the US National Fire Protection Association, using a broader definition of "intentional" firesetting, suggest that the annual rate of intentional firesetting may be as high as 83 incidents per 100,000 inhabitants¹ (Campbell, 2017). It is worth noting that this higher figure may also include a proportion of firesetting incidents where the cause remained undetermined or may otherwise not have met the FBI definition.

In the UK, deliberate firesetting is operationalised within government figures as fires that have been attended by the Fire and Rescue Service and the motive recorded as deliberate. The most recent statistics available for England suggest that there were approximately 122 deliberate fires per 100,000 inhabitants annually in 2019 and 2020 (Home Office, 2021). Canadian statistics for the years spanning 2015 to 2019 suggest that rates of arson incidents are consistently between 22 and 27 per 100,000 (Statistics Canada, 2021). Data from Ireland's Central Statistics Office (2016) on the number of arson incidents recorded by police in 2015 suggest that there were 37 reported arson incidents per 100,000 inhabitants.