ADULT DELIBERATE FIRESETTING

THEORY, ASSESSMENT, AND TREATMENT

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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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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

September 2021

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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 inhabitants[1] (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. Data reported by Ketola and Kokki (2018) suggest that Finnish rescue services recorded approximately 20 deliberate fires per 100,000 residents.

Smith et al. (2014) used data from four Australian states to estimate the number of recorded victims of arson in Australia in 2011. Based on the figures calculated by Smith et al. (2014), we estimate that there were approximately 67 victims of arson for every 100,000 inhabitants in Australia at this time. These figures are broadly consistent with the annual rate per hundred thousand of arson offences recorded in one Australian state (Victoria) spanning 2011–2016, which ranged from 57 to 74 per 100,000 inhabitants (Crime Statistics Agency Victoria, n.d.). However, Smith et al. (2014) also estimated, based on Mayhew (2003), that there are two unreported arson victims for every case reported to the police, suggesting that the annual

prevalence of arson victimisation in Australia may be as high as 200 per 100,000. Thus, it would be sensible to assume a similar under-reporting of arson in the other jurisdictions where rates are available.

We caution against comparing these figures cross-nationally because the methods of data collection vary considerably across jurisdictions. However, we consider it reasonable to estimate that the annual prevalence of deliberate firesetting serious enough to be reported to police or demand attention from fire services in the countries discussed may be in the range of 40–200 incidents per 100,000 inhabitants, when taking under-reporting into account (Mayhew, 2003; Smith et al., 2014). It remains an open question whether variability in these figures across countries reflects true cross-national differences in the rate of firesetting or is an artefact of differences in reporting and/or investigation practices between countries.

An alternative to examining rates of deliberate firesetting recorded in agency records is to use self-reported firesetting as an indicator of prevalence. To date, the most robust self-report study to ask about self-reported deliberate firesetting was the US National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (Blanco et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2010). This dataset, representative of the US population, included whether participants answered yes to the question “In your entire life, did you ever start a fire on purpose to destroy someone else’s property or just to see it burn?” Using this broad—but property-focused—definition, approximately 1% of participants reported to have a lifetime prevalence of deliberate firesetting (Blanco et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2010).

As clinicians, one of the first questions asked is how prevalent is this offending behaviour? This helps to

understand whether the behaviour requires resources invested to address it. The definitional and measurement issues presented thus far demonstrate that the research evidence needs to be interpreted with care and needs to be framed within the context of the criteria for which data are collected and recorded.

Adult Firesetting as a Neglected Topic of Research

Research examining the psychological factors underpinning firesetting behaviour and treatment for firesetting has undergone a sea change in the past decade or so. Prior to this, research on adult firesetting appeared occasionally in the literature and had relatively minimal impact. However, since the publication of a review of the state of the literature by Gannon and Pina in 2010, there have been year-on-year increases in the number of outputs on firesetting, which have impacted on the wider psychological and criminological literature. Even older papers (e.g., Inciardi, 1970; Jackson et al., 1987) have seen notable increases in rates of citation in the past decade as a new generation of researchers revisits these canonical sources. It appears that sustained research from a number of research teams (especially in the UK and Australia) from 2010 onwards resulted in a critical mass for the topic. This critical mass was likely brought about by researchers and research funders recognising that adult firesetting reflects a major public health and criminal justice concern with a large human and financial cost.

The neglect of adult firesetting as a research topic likely stems from an interaction of factors. First, research on firesetting has historically focused on firesetting behaviour in children and adolescents. We will explore the reasons for this and the contribution of this literature to the

understanding of adult firesetting. Second, it appears that there was a general belief that firesetting could be explained by either mental disorder (i.e., pyromania) or by general criminality (e.g., people setting fires to claim insurance or destroy evidence). Given that diagnoses of pyromania are exceptionally rare, there may have been a belief that firesetting behaviour was mostly addressable through general criminal offending programs. Readers of this book will see that the evidence base now suggests that many individuals who set fires have unique characteristics (see Chapter 2) requiring tailored risk assessments (see Chapter 4), and crucially, would benefit from interventions designed to target their distinct treatment needs (see Chapters 6 and 7).

Key Developments in the Childhood Firesetting Literature

The firesetting literature has had an asymmetrical focus on children who set fires despite evidence that only half of fires are set by children (Cassel & Bernstein, 2007). There are likely to be a number of reasons for this asymmetry, including (1) a lack of awareness of the prevalence or seriousness of adult firesetting, (2) an assumption that firesetting was a *fire safety* and thus educational challenge, and (3) a belief that childhood firesetting may be indicative of serious and violent offending in adulthood (e.g., the "MacDonald triad"). Based on interviews with 100 residents in a psychiatric facility, MacDonald (1963) concluded that the presence of (1) enuresis (beyond 5 years of age), (2) animal cruelty, and (3) firesetting during their childhoods, taken together, was a prognostic indicator of future violence (operationalised as "threats to kill"). The clinically appealing nature of this study for diagnostic and risk assessment purposes appears to have resulted in its wide-spread and continued application (Barrow et al.,

2014). This is despite MacDonald's findings never being replicated. Instead, the evidence suggests that the presence of either animal cruelty or firesetting during childhood is more indicative of dysfunctional and abusive childhoods (i.e., environments that normalise violent behaviour) rather than violent behaviour itself (Parfitt & Alleyne, 2020).

There has since been a shift away from focussing on the firesetting–violence link towards developing the understanding of the more proximal causes of firesetting behaviour. Root et al. (2008) explain that juvenile firesetting may be the outcome of child abuse and its resulting affective and behavioural difficulties. The DSM-5 views firesetting behaviour as a feature of conduct disorder in children. That is, deliberately setting fires to destroy property (note animal cruelty as well) is a diagnostic criterion for conduct disorder—"a repetitive and persistent pattern of behaviour in which the basic rights of others … are violated" (APA, 2013).

The child literature has also offered some insight into the dynamic risk factors associated with firesetting behaviour. For example, as a result of neglectful parenting styles (Slavkin, 2000) as well as the previously mentioned abusive household environments, children and adolescents who set fires develop impoverished and unsophisticated interpersonal social abilities. These abilities form the basis of their dysfunctional attachment styles (Räsänen et al., 1996). These relational issues have since been captured in the adult literature. Most notably, adults (in particular men) who set fires exhibit signs of loneliness with limited and/or unhelpful social support networks (Rice & Harris, 2008). Maladaptive attachment styles are associated with offending more broadly (e.g., Ross & Pfäfflin, 2007; Ward et al., 1996), and their role in reinforcing offending behaviour makes them highly suitable targets for treatment in adults.

In sum, this literature tells us that childhood firesetting points to maladaptive and dysfunctional childhood environments conducive of offending behaviour. But more important, it appears that a history of firesetting behaviour during childhood may be a risk factor for future firesetting in adulthood (Ducat et al., 2015). Therefore, the firesetting behaviour itself is indicative of a developmental psychopathology that supports the use of fire as a coping strategy and/or problem-solving method. This conceptualisation has been captured in the latest theories (see Chapter 3) and has significant implications for assessment (see Chapter 4) and treatment (see Chapters 6 and 7).

Sexual Offending Literature as a Guiding Framework

Given the paucity of the adult firesetting literature pre-2010, researchers turned to more established literatures (i.e., sexual offending) to inform the research agenda moving forward. However, although early theorising suggested a relationship between firesetting and sexual dysfunction, little available evidence substantiates this link as a major explanatory factor for adult firesetting (Ó Ciardha, 2015). Research on sexual offending has nonetheless been influential in developing knowledge relating to firesetting. This is likely the result of the longstanding recognition of sexual offending—particularly child sexual abuse—as a public health problem in need of sustained research to develop knowledge for prevention and treatment. As a result, the burgeoning field of research on deliberate adult firesetting has been able to draw on practices and concepts from the more established field of research on sexual offending.

A key influence of the field of sexual offending on firesetting research has been work by Tony Ward and

various collaborators. The Multi-Trajectory Theory of Adult Firesetting (M-TTAF; Gannon et al., 2012) is an example of theorising in firesetting that draws inspiration from work, including that of Ward and Beech (2006), Ward and Hudson (1998), and Ward et al. (2006), on how to effectively develop, appraise, and knit together theories in sexual offending. Models of the offence process (micro theories) of firesetting behaviour (e.g., Barnoux et al., 2015; Tyler et al., 2014) also used methods applied by Ward et al. (1995) to the investigation of the offence process of people who sexually offend against children. Furthermore, Ward hypothesised that *implicit theories* (Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999) and *offence scripts* (Ward & Hudson, 2000) form part of an explanatory framework for the offence-supportive belief systems of people who commit sexual offences. These concepts have been highly influential in theory development (e.g., Butler & Gannon, 2015; Ó Ciardha & Gannon, 2012; see Chapter 3) and empirical research (e.g., Barrowcliffe et al., 2019; Butler & Gannon, 2021) on firesetting behaviour.

Changes and developments in the treatment of sexual offending over the past number of decades have also influenced current practice in the treatment of firesetting. For example, those interested in best practice with people who have sexually offended have been confronted with questions around dealing with clients who deny or minimise their offending. Similarly practice regarding treatment of sexual offending has had to navigate whether treatment ethos is most effective using a risk-based or a strengths-based approach. Building from the evidence base around what works for sexual offending has allowed contemporary intervention programmes for people who have been apprehended for firesetting (see Chapters 6 and 7) to be developed, conscious of principles of risk, need, and responsivity (Andrews & Bonta, 2010) and strength-

based approaches to treatment (Good Lives Model; Ward & Stewart, 2003). These intervention programmes have been able to avoid the pitfalls faced by early sexual offending practice whereby denial and minimisation posed barriers to treatment involvement (Maruna & Mann, 2006).