The Complexity of Burglars’ Responses to Empathy Cues: A Multi-Method Investigation

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ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

There is limited research regarding situational variation in empathy among offenders or whether certain cues can affect offense choices by inducing empathy. This study explored that question with a sample of incarcerated burglars. Participants provided qualitative evaluations of pictured homes and completed a written survey in which they numerically rated the impact of specific home features on their target choices. This permitted some assessment of methodological and social desirability effects across the photographic and survey methods. The results indicated that empathy cues (e.g., signs of children or the elderly) may deter some burglars from potential targets, but even apparent empathetic deterrence may result from alternative interpretations of the cues or the interaction of those items with other home features.

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Although empathy is broadly defined as “an affective response stemming from the understanding of another’s emotional state or condition” (Decety & Meyer, 2008, p. 1054), empathy research is notable for its lack of definitional consistency (Barnett & Mann, 2013; Decety & Cowell, 2014). There is commonly a distinction made between cognitive and affective empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011), yet this bifurcation has been criticized for a lack of empirical support as others have proposed alternative dimensions (Barnett & Mann, 2013; Blair, 2005). Posick, Rocque, and Rafter (2014) provide an extensive overview of these definitional debates. This paper does not revisit those arguments, since

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separating the dimensions of empathy was not the focus of this paper. Rather, this work was concerned with variation in responses to empathy-inducing cues, and regardless of how empathy is parsed, “the proposed relationship with behavior is exactly the same. That is, the presence of empathy facilitates prosocial behavior and inhibits antisocial behavior” (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a, p. 540). Prior research suggests that empathy is vital for a variety of prosocial outcomes, such as assisting others in need and intervening on behalf of stigmatized persons (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Condon, Desbordes, Miller, & DeSteno, 2013; Weisz & Zaki, 2017). Conversely, other studies have considered whether a lack of empathy facilitates anti-social behavior and crime by enabling people to ignore the harm done to victims (Barnett & Mann, 2013; Burke, 2001; Smallbone, Wheaton, & Hourigan, 2003). Despite that research, empathy has received insufficient attention from criminologists, as noted by Cullen (2011) in his 2010 address to the American Society of Criminology. This paper is a response to that call and incorporates empathy into burglary research by evaluating burglars’ responses to situational cues.

**Literature Review**

**Empathy among Offenders**

One of the more established areas of criminological empathy research concerns sexual offenders (Barnett & Mann, 2013). For example, several studies have found significantly lower empathy among juvenile sex offenders compared to non-offending youth (Burke, 2001; Lindsey, Carlozzi, & Eells, 2001). Hunter, Figueredo, Becker, and Malamuth (2007) also studied juvenile sex offenders and found that emotional empathy was associated with a reduced likelihood of non-sexual offending. Additionally, empathy mediated the effects of other variables (such as hostile attitudes) related to offending. Conversely, Smallbone and colleagues (2003) found that lower empathy was not associated with the number of sexual offense convictions among adult sex offenders, but it was positively related to the commission of non-sexual offenses.

Analyses of non-sexual offenders provide inconsistent evidence about whether they lack empathy (Burke, 2001). Goldstein and Higgins-D’Alessandro (2001) found no significant differences in affective empathy between adult offenders and non-offenders after controlling for age. Likewise, Larden, Melin, Holst, and Langstrom (2006) found no association between empathy and delinquency among juvenile offenders and a comparison group in Sweden, although delinquents did display less mature moral beliefs (e.g., about whether it is important to obey the law). Conversely, Posick and colleagues (2014) did not use a control group but analyzed information obtained during in-home interviews with nearly 5,000 young adults. They concluded that empathy was associated with self-reported delinquency, even after controlling for demographic variables. Hepper, Hart, Meek, Cisek, and Sedikides (2014) compared incarcerated young males to a non-incarcerated control group and found a significant link between narcissism and offending that was mediated by lack of empathy. Jolliffe and Farrington’s (2006b) assessment of 720 youth in the U. K. found lower empathy among delinquent males compared to non-delinquents, although this pattern did not hold among females. Furthermore, for both sexes, violent and high-rate delinquents had lower empathy even compared to other offenders. In sum, the effect of empathy among non-sexual offenders has varied across the methodologies and operationalizations of prior studies.

**Behavioral Outcomes of Empathy**

Some scholars have suggested that empathy-inducing cues can produce behavioral responses in addition to cognitive or emotional ones (Davis 1996, as cited in Lindsey et al., 2001; Posick et al., 2014). As Jolliffe and Farrington (2011) noted, “the ability to experience or understand another person’s negative emotions…should motivate a person with high empathy to act to alleviate this suffering” (p. 59). They reasoned that low empathy facilitates anti-social behavior by freeing the person to act without consideration for others. Similarly, Polascheck (2003) contended that low empathy may open the gates to socially unacceptable actions, but situational factors will impact the specific behavioral results (as cited in Barnett & Mann, 2013). Mackenzie (2006) also remarked that behavior can be shaped not only by the presence of empathy, but by contextual factors, which can “cue” certain actions (p. 376).

Despite these discussions, the influence of situational features on offenders’ empathy has received little empirical testing (Barnett & Mann, 2013). One exception is Jolliffe and Farrington’s (2011) paper, which went beyond assessing the effect of empathy on the likelihood of offending to consider behavioral manifestations. That is, they tested the possibility that varying levels or types of empathy might affect the style of offending (e.g., name-calling versus physical bullying). They found that empathy differences were associated with variation in the frequency and type of bullying behavior (e.g., indirect, violent, etc.). This finding added specificity to the literature regarding the influence of empathy on offense-related behaviors. It also suggests a need for
research considering how empathetic considerations might shape the commission of other offenses.

**Empathy and Burglary**

Criminologists have studied burglary for decades (Maguire & Bennett, 1982; Shover, 1972; Wright & Decker, 1994) and have frequently grounded their research in rational choice and routine activities theories, which assume that offenders’ choices are at least quasi-rational (Decker, Wright, & Logie, 1993; Rountree & Land, 1996; Sanders, Kuhns, & Blevins, 2016; Tseloni, Wittebrood, Farrell, & Pease, 2004). These perspectives are well-suited for explaining burglars’ target selections, as those choices typically involve weighing some of the risks and benefits of potential targets (Cromwell & Olson, 2004; Wright & Decker, 1994). This does not mean that every burglary is based on careful consideration of risk and reward (Cromwell & Olson, 2004; Sanders et al., 2016; Wright & Decker, 1994), but it does imply that burglars’ target choices are not haphazard and thus can be influenced by cues about costs and benefits (Clare, 2011; Nee et al., 2015; Sanders et al., 2016; Roth & Roberts, 2017). Clearly, these potential risks and rewards can be physical, such as valuable items and threatening dogs. Yet, crime prevention scholars have also noted that some offenders can be deterred by intangible considerations such as guilt and shame (Clarke, 1997; Clarke & Homel, 1997; Wortley, 1996). Older burglary research did not extensively assess these factors, but pity and concern for victims appeared to be uncommon (Maguire & Bennett, 1982; Nee & Taylor, 1988; Wright & Decker, 1994). However, not all victims generated equal responses, as some burglars claimed to steal only from those who could afford it (Maguire & Bennett, 1982; Wright & Decker, 1994). This finding implied possible empathy toward certain targets. Palmer, Holmes, and Hollin (2002) later found that about 60% of burglars claimed to consider how their victims felt, although their study did not assess whether that influenced their actual target selections. Taylor’s (2014, 2018) recent work did much to expand this vein of research by explicitly assessing how moral considerations influenced the crimes of burglars in the United Kingdom. Semi-structured interviews with 30 convicted burglars in the United Kingdom indicated that moral codes shaped many aspects of offending, including target selection (Taylor, 2014). They targeted wealthy homes partly because of the perception that such victims “could afford it” and consistently avoided two types of victims: the elderly and children (Taylor, 2014, p. 6). For example, one participant claimed the following: “I wouldn’t like it done to my grandma or grandad so I won’t do that to old people” (Taylor, 2014, p. 10). This principle carried great weight in target selection, as “there was consensus that visual cues enabled a burglar to identify houses with elderly residents quickly, and this cue would override all others in their assessment of its desirability to burgle” (Taylor, 2014, p. 10). Likewise, verbal protocol analyses conducted in a burglary hotspot found that certain targets (e.g., the elderly) and methods (e.g., distraction burglary) were perceived as “dishonourable” and thus avoided (Taylor, 2018, p. 351).

Taylor’s work raises interesting possibilities about a role for empathy in both burglary prevention and offender rehabilitation. However, a study using photographs to simulate target selection with a sample of U.S. burglars found that cues of children or the elderly did not affect the burglars’ choices (Roth & Roberts, 2017). This paper uses two other forms of data collected from that sample to examine the role of empathy in target selection, as well as possible methodological or social desirability effects. This work thus strengthens the literature in several ways. One, it continues Taylor’s (2014, 2018) expansion of empathy research to burglary. Two, there has been a lack of attention to situational variation in behavioral manifestations of empathy, and this paper is a contribution on that front. Three, it sheds additional light on the inconsistent findings of Taylor (2014) and Roth and Roberts (2017).

**Method**

**Sample**

The sample for this study contained 52 adult male burglars from three jails in western Pennsylvania. Among these participants, 88.5% were White, 3.8% Black, and 7.7% other races; the large portion of White offenders reflected the demographics of the counties containing the jails. The average age of participants was 29.3, and the number of burglaries committed ranged from 1 to 250, with a mean of 27.6. Although some may claim that samples of incarcerated burglars contain the least successful burglars (i.e., those who have been caught), Nee and Taylor (2000) strongly defend the validity of prison-based burglary research. Furthermore, even research with active burglars does not support the existence of a large number of undetected burglars who differ substantially from their incarcerated counterparts (Wright & Decker, 1994). Additionally, two factors increased the representativeness of this sample. One, the jails contained accused burglars awaiting disposition as well as convicted burglars. This substantially strengthened the sample, as more burglars have been arrested for the crime (58%) than have been convicted of it (25%; Wright & Decker, 1994). Two, the sample contained inmates with a variety of current offenses as
a part of a larger research project. Any inmate who
admitted to committing past burglaries was included
as a burglar, regardless of whether their official record
contained that offense. This facilitated the inclusion of
undetected burglars and further expanded
representativeness of the sample, as about nine in ten
burglars have been arrested for some offense (Wright
& Decker, 1994). Overall, about 20% of the current
sample had never been arrested for burglary.

Procedures

The interviews occurred in private rooms in
county jails, with only the subject and researcher
present. The researcher collected three types of data;
this paper analyzes two of them. First, participants
viewed home photographs and indicated whether they
would burgle the pictured residences; Roth and Roberts (2017) detailed those results, and so this paper
does not include them (see Appendix for an example
of these photographs). Second, after making a decision
about each home, the participants provided a
qualitative description of the rationale for their choice.
Third, in the last portion of the interview, participants
completed a researcher-administered survey in which
they numerically rated the influence of specific home
features on their target choices (see Table 1). Thus, the
current study presents results from these latter two
forms of data (the qualitative responses to home
photographs and the numeric ratings from the survey)
and compares them to the findings of Taylor (2014)
and Roth and Roberts (2017). These procedures were
approved in advance by the institutional review board
and were conducted in accordance with principles of
ethical research including beneficence, informed
consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality.

Qualitative responses to photographs. Due to
the practical and ethical difficulties of asking burglars
to evaluate actual residences (Nee, 2003), burglary
researchers often use other methods, including home
photographs, to simulate target selection (e.g., Cozens,
Hillier, & Prescott, 2002; Ham-Rowbottom, Gifford,
& Shaw, 1999; Shaw & Gifford, 1994; Snook, Dhami,
& Kavanagh, 2010; Wright, Logie, & Decker, 1995).
In this study, participants viewed 50 different pairs of
8.5” by 11” photographs depicting stand-alone homes
with various combinations of cues (e.g., children’s
toys, dogs, etc.). Each pair depicted a home from two
angles (about 45 degrees to the left and right) to
provide a full street view of the property and the sides
of nearby homes. For homes on a street corner, one
photograph pictured each street-facing side. Aside
from the intentionally varied cues, the researcher
standardized other aspects of the photographs as much
as possible; all photographs were taken in midday,
contained no visible persons, and had no snow on the
ground.

The independent variables in the photographs
consisted of features that may influence burglars’
target choices, including the empathy cues that are the
focus of this study (Roth & Roberts, 2017 contains full
descriptions of the non-empathy variables). The
pictures included two types of empathy cues: signs of
children and signs of the elderly or physically
disabled. To prevent participants from recognizing
repetition of the same feature, this study
operationalized each type using several cues. To
assess possible empathy toward children, some
photographs included at least one of the following:
children’s toys in the yard, children’s bicycles, or a
basketball goal. Similarly, to assess empathy toward
the elderly and physically disabled, some photographs
included a wheelchair on the porch, or disabled license
plate or sign on a vehicle. After viewing each
residence, participants made verbal assessments of the
home’s suitability for burglary that provided the
qualitative data for this paper. These descriptions
focused exclusively on the cues deemed relevant by
each participant; the researcher did not prompt them to
notice or comment on any particular features.

Survey method. After participants viewed the
photographs, they responded to a short survey about
the effect of specific home features on their target
choices. Since imprisoned offenders often have lower
education and literacy than the general population
(Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2007; Shutay,
Plebanski, & McCafferty, 2010), this survey was
verbally administered by the researcher as
recommended by Fowler (2002). Although
photographs are a common way of simulating target
selection in the burglary literature, other work has used
surveys with written descriptions of properties or
home features (Garcia-Retamero & Dhani, 2009;
Palmer et al., 2002; Sanders et al., 2016; Wright et al.,
1995). The use of both methods within the same study
permitted comparison of the photographic and survey
responses. The survey contained a list of home
features that may affect burglars’ target selections (see
Table 1). For each item, the participant rated how each
would typically influence their target choices. Reponses
were coded onto an 11-point scale ranging from -5 to 5,
where -5 meant that item made them very
much less likely to burgle a home, 5 meant very much
more likely, and 0 meant the item had no impact.

Analysis

As previously noted, a prior paper analyzed the
first type of collected data – the burglars’ choices
about the pictured homes (Roth & Roberts, 2017).
Because those analyses required particular statistical methods, their coefficients are not directly comparable to the ratings from the survey method presented in this work. However, by examining the direction and size of the empathy effects relative to the other home features within each method, it is possible to gain a sense of how the method (photographic or survey) may have influenced subjects’ self-presentation and the results regarding empathy. Table 1 presents the results from the survey method in which burglars numerically rated home features. A lack of normality in the survey data meant that the researcher could not use a one-sample t-test to assess whether the mean ratings in Table 1 significantly differed from zero. Instead, the analysis used one-sample Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests, which indicated that the median for each item significantly differed from zero (using a Bonferroni-corrected $p$-value of .0028), with the exception of peeling paint, an overgrown yard, locks, and deadbolt locks.

### Table 1: Ratings of Home Features from Survey Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>One-Sample Wilcoxon</th>
<th>$Z$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s toys are in the yard</td>
<td>-2.61</td>
<td>-3.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-5.15</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handicapped residents live in the house</td>
<td>-2.11</td>
<td>-3.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-4.23</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly residents live in the house</td>
<td>-1.75</td>
<td>-3.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.62</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupancy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The TV is turned on inside the home</td>
<td>-3.80</td>
<td>-4.50</td>
<td></td>
<td>-5.99</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lights are on inside the home</td>
<td>-3.11</td>
<td>-4.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-5.30</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A car is in the driveway</td>
<td>-3.44</td>
<td>-4.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-5.86</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupancy Proxies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sign of a security company is in the yard</td>
<td>-2.32</td>
<td>-3.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-4.64</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A dog lives at the house</td>
<td>-2.78</td>
<td>-3.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-5.41</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The house is located on the corner of the street</td>
<td>-1.50</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.58</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The home is easily seen from a neighbor’s house</td>
<td>-3.67</td>
<td>-4.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-6.05</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lights are on outside the home</td>
<td>-1.25</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td></td>
<td>-4.23</td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A car is in the neighbor’s driveway</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.86</td>
<td>.004*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadbolt locks are on the doors</td>
<td>-0.67</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.25</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bars are on the windows</td>
<td>-2.23</td>
<td>-4.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.93</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windows are made of glass blocks</td>
<td>-1.44</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.28</td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locks are on the windows</td>
<td>-0.73</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.12</td>
<td>.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The yard is poorly kept and overgrown</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>.451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paint on the outside of the home is peeling</td>
<td>-0.73</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.94</td>
<td>.052</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p*<Bonferroni-corrected value of .0028

**Empathy toward Children**

Taylor (2014) found that burglars preferred to avoid stealing from children. Conversely, Roth & Roberts (2017) found that the presence of cues of children did not affect burglars’ decisions about pictured homes, while alarms and dogs were among the most influential cues. In the survey results presented here, the deterrent effect of children (mean rating -2.61) was stronger than that of an alarm (-2.32) and approached that of dogs (-2.78). In sum, various methods have produced contrasting results about
burglars’ willingness to victimize homes with children. The burglars’ qualitative descriptions of their choices about the photographs provide context for these findings. A sizeable minority of participants (21 of 52) noted that signs of children were a reason for avoiding some homes (pseudonyms used for all quotations):

"Honestly, I probably wouldn't burglarize it because there's kids there." (George)

"I'm not gonna take from anyone that has children." (Joshua)

"Honestly, I feel bad because there's kids there." (Alex)

"I don't want to take away from parents like that." (Justin)

Some participants expressed that their empathy was rooted in their own status as parents:

"I got a little kid and I know what I'd feel like if someone did it to me and I got a little kid." (David)

"I just had a kid, so had a change of heart about things" (George)

"I have a kid and I wouldn't want to traumatize children." (Joel)

However, for other burglars, avoidance of these homes was rooted in a desire to avoid a physical encounter with children, rather than qualms about stealing from them.

"What if there's a kid in there? What if something happens to the child and you permanently screw that kid up?" (Tim)

"Kids matter - no one wants to hurt a kid." (Tony)

"Wait for people to leave - they got little kids." (Jon)

In light of such expressions of empathy, which are consistent with Taylor’s (2014) research, the insignificance of cues of children in Roth & Roberts (2017) may be surprising. Two factors may explain their lack of significance. One is that more than half of these burglars did not mention cues of children as a reason to bypass any home. A second is the interaction between signs of children and the presence of dogs. Specifically, among some burglars, the presence of children diminished the danger associated with dogs:

"Anybody that has a kid that has a dog you need to beware of, it's not gonna bite you." (Greg)

"Got kids so it's [the dog] not a biter." (Rich)

Empathy for the Elderly and Physically Disabled

The majority of Taylor’s (2014) burglars bypassed elderly victims, yet cues of such residents had no effect on burglars’ decisions about the pictured homes in Roth & Roberts (2017). In the survey method of this study, cues of elderly (-1.75) and disabled residents (-2.11) were rated as deterrents, although not as strong as signs of children. Qualitative responses to the photographs further illuminate burglars’ reactions to disabled or elderly persons. About half of the burglars (28 of 52) noted these cues as a reason to bypass a residence, although proponents did not consistently apply this principle. In some situations, they claimed to avoid these homes:

"Houses are very personal, so I wouldn't do elderly people. I wouldn't want somebody robbing my grandma." (Joel)

"I'd pass that right by....I have a conscience." (Nick)

"There's something about robbing handicapped people that don't suit (sic) well with me." (Rich)

"I ain't that ruthless." (Jeffrey)

"I'm not cold hearted like that." (Jeremy)

"That would just be wrong on so many levels." (Greg)

In some circumstances, however, participants were willing to overlook the unpleasantness of burgling the disabled due to perceived ease or potential rewards:

"When I see handicapped on people that have money, I'm like 'fuck it, they'll replace it,' and when I see it on lower end houses I'd feel more remorse for it." (Kenny)

Another burglar (Kevin) commented that victimizing the disabled would “just be cruel” but later responded that he would burglarize a pictured home with cues of physically disabled residents because it was a “really nice house.” Notably, the comments regarding the photographs revealed that they sometimes interpreted these cues as a sign that people were likely to be home. Thus, for some burglars, the avoidance of these homes was not due to empathy but to a desire to avoid encountering residents:

"Now there's a monkey wrench in it - that wheelchair, so there's someone home all the time." (Rich)
“Even though it’s ritzy lookin’, there’s still a handicapped person in there somewhere.” (Jeffrey)

“Wheelchair outside means there’s gotta be someone inside.” (Todd)

“If they’re handicapped they probably don’t leave too much.” (Blake)

“That person might probably be home a lot.” (Cory, commenting on a disabled person’s license plate)

**Limitations**

This study solicited qualitative responses from individual burglars about homes pictured in daylight. Thus, there are limitations of this work regarding the generalizability of the findings to other situations, such as night burglaries or those committed with co-offenders. However, most burglaries are committed during the day (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015), and the extent of co-offending among burglars is unclear in the literature. Hodgson and Costello (2006) estimated that lone offenders committed 86% of burglaries (see also Lamm Weisel, 2004; Lantz & Hutchinson, 2015; van Mastrigt & Farrington, 2009). Similarly, drug and alcohol use are common among burglars (Cromwell & Olson, 2004; Wright & Decker, 1994), and so their attitudes toward empathy cues may differ when under the influence of controlled substances. However, as compared to actually entering a residence, target selection involves little risk, and so there is less need to bolster courage with controlled substances. Ethnographic studies suggest that burglars are more likely to use drugs and alcohol to alleviate the anxiety associated with entering the home rather than during target selection (Cromwell & Olson, 2004). Finally, as addressed in the methods section, it is possible that the incarcerated offenders in this sample are among the least successful members of the larger population of burglars.

**Discussion**

Overall, comparison of the findings from this study with prior analyses (Taylor, 2014, 2018; Roth & Roberts, 2017) suggests two lessons for empathy research. One is the importance of multi-method approaches. Nee and Taylor (2000) highlighted the value of “methodological triangulation” in which diverse approaches to burglary research have produced similar and complementary results (p. 58). The results of this paper suggest that research might benefit from such triangulation within individual studies to gain a more detailed understanding of observed effects. For example, cues of disabled and elderly residents had negative effects on homes’ appeal in the survey method, which suggests empathic deterrence in which burglars avoid some homes out of pity for the residents. Yet, the qualitative responses also revealed the perceived near-constant occupancy of such homes. Further, the quantitative analysis of burglars’ target choices found no effect from empathy cues after accounting for other situational factors (Roth & Roberts, 2017). Thus, if a single method is used, it should ideally be able to capture the complexity of burglars’ responses to situational cues (verbal protocol analysis may be useful on this front – see Taylor, 2018). Additionally, multi-method approaches to studying situational variation in the effects of empathy may be necessary to avoid confounding empathetic deterrence with other factors shaping offenders’ decisions. This is particularly the case at present when little research exists regarding situational influences on empathy during offense commission.

The second notable finding concerns social desirability, which is “attributing qualities to oneself that are likely to elicit approval from others and rejecting qualities that are likely to elicit disapproval” (Taylor, 2018, p. 61). This may occur intentionally when participants attempt to “fake good” or unintentionally when self-deceived participants actually believe their responses (King & Brunner, 2000, p. 81; Paulhus, 1984). Social desirability is especially a concern for research with offenders who may wish to present themselves favorably to avoid the stigma of criminality (Mills, Loza, & Kroner, 2003; Tan & Grace, 2008; van de Mortel, 2008). The results of this study suggest that certain methodologies may be more prone to these problems of self-presentation or social desirability bias. When asked specifically (in the survey) about how children living in a home affected its appeal as a target, the burglars indicated a deterrent effect on par with that of alarms and dogs. Yet, their responses to the photographs, in which they did not have to directly admit their attitude about stealing from children, contradicted this finding (Roth & Roberts, 2017). Thus, methods that provide combinations of cues in context may strengthen situational empathy research (e.g., Nee et al., 2015; Taylor, 2018; Wright et al., 1995). Conversely, methods that separate cues from context (such as the survey method used here) and require more direct admissions of cold-heartedness may be more prone to bias from social desirability or participants’ faulty self-perceptions.

Prior criminological empathy research has typically attempted to measure empathy and evaluate its association with offending (Burke, 2001; Jolliffe & Murray, 2012), and so there is much room for future}

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research to expand knowledge of situational variations in empathy. For example, do offenders view some potential victims (e.g., children) as more deserving of empathy than others (e.g., intoxicated people) who play a role in their own vulnerability? Because prior analyses have found that personal characteristics (e.g., age, intelligence, socio-economic status) account for some effects attributed to empathy (Goldstein & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2001; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004), future research might also consider how offenders’ own traits and backgrounds shape their responses to situational empathy cues. For example, some burglars made comments about their own children, and so researchers might evaluate whether offenders who are parents are more reluctant to victimize children. Similarly, Nee (2015) has called for research regarding the interaction between emotions (e.g., empathy) and offenders’ expertise. Such studies might particularly be strengthened by combining direct measures of empathy with the present approach of evaluating its impact on offending choices, as done by Jolliffe and Farrington (2011).

Future research in this area may be useful for law enforcement and others interested in situational prevention of burglary. Clarke and Homel (1997) noted the possibility of deterring crime by increasing psychological costs, since some offenders must overcome the feelings of guilt and shame associated with crime. Wortley (1996) proposed several strategies for inducing these reactions, such as increasing emotional feelings for victims and increasing victims’ worth in the eyes of the offender by minimizing depersonalization. For example, he noted that improving employees’ attachment to a company can hinder their ability to view it as deserving of theft or fraud. Both Clarke and Homel (1997) and Wortley (1996) described an array of past interventions that have aimed to prevent crime via increased guilt and shame. The results presented in this paper partly support the use of such tactics for burglary prevention, as sizeable portions of burglars expressed their aversion to victimizing children and the elderly. However, this work also reveals the complexity of those empathetic responses and their relationship with other contextual factors such as occupancy and reward. Ultimately, more work is needed in this area, but it does appear that efforts to deter burglars with empathy cues should carefully consider how those features may interact with other situational factors such as occupancy and reward.

In addition to enhancing situational crime prevention, greater criminological focus on empathy may lead to improved person-focused interventions. One, at a broad level, there may be opportunities to enhance empathy in the general population through empathy training for young people. Past programs have increased empathy in both non-offending young adults and children with behavioral problems (Dadds, Cauchi, Wimalaweera, Hawes, & Brennan, 2012; Soble, Spanierman, & Liao, 2011; see Weisz & Zaki, 2017 for a systematic review of such programs). Two, there may be a role for empathy in offender rehabilitation. Taylor (2016) describes incorporating burglars’ empathetic considerations into the Good Life Model (GLM), a rehabilitative strategy aimed at helping offenders leverage their strengths into personally satisfying lives centered on legal activities. Similarly, if burglars commonly excuse the harm they have caused through the belief that victims can afford it (Salmelainen, 1995; Taylor, 2014; Wright & Decker, 1994), then restorative justice programs may illuminate that damage and increase empathetic considerations in the future. Admittedly, there is mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of restorative justice with property offenders, likely to due to inter-program content differences (e.g., Bergsseth & Bouffard, 2013; Galaway, 1988; Hayes, 2005; Sherman, Strang, & Woods, 2000). Thus, research that further clarifies empathy among burglars may provide useful guidance for future restorative interventions with them. Ultimately, Taylor (2016) contends that the appearance of empathy in some burglars “presents a clear opportunity for rehabilitation work” through “harnessing the discord between participating in criminal activity and the desire to absolve oneself of guilt” (p. 10).

Future research could also explore empathy from other theoretical perspectives that suggest a role for low empathy in the etiology of crime. For example, Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) general theory of crime describes self-centeredness as one dimension of low self-control, and a popular self-control measure includes statements such as “I will try to get things I want even when I know it’s causing problems for other people” and “I’m not very sympathetic to other people when they are having problems” (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993, p. 15). Thus, self-control theory implies a lack of empathy among offenders, which may also weaken social control by hindering development of strong bonds with others (Posick et al., 2014). Similarly, the influence of parenting on the development of empathy (Schaffer, Clark, & Jeglic, 2009; Strayer & Roberts, 2004) is easily incorporated into social learning theories, which often emphasize the importance of close relationships that develop early in life and last over a long period time. Additionally, several of Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques of neutralization, such as minimizing the harm done, enable offenders to excuse their own lack of empathy. Finally, research findings regarding genetic predictors of empathy and changes in empathy over the life-course support the inclusion of empathy.

Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society – Volume 19, Issue 1
in biological and developmental perspectives (Posick et al., 2014).

Overall, the role of low empathy in offending is uncontroversial; it was the second most highly rated cause of criminal behavior among members of the American Society of Criminology (Cooper, Walsh, & Ellis, 2008). Despite this recognition, “the current state of the evidence regarding the relationship between empathy and offending is poor” (Jolliffe & Murray, 2012, p. 65) and has rarely considered whether situational variation in empathy may affect decisions about what type of offense to commit or who constitutes a suitable victim. This paper explored that possibility for burglary. Although some participants expressed empathy, the results also illustrate the potential influence of methodology on the findings. Thus, there is a need for additional work to expand research regarding situational empathy to include other crimes and victims.

References


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