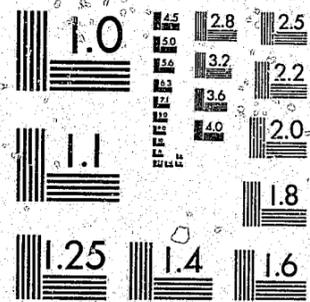


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FIRE/ARSON INVESTIGATION

RESEARCH PAPER

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PROFILE OF A PYROMANIAC

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PROFILE OF A PYROMANIAC

What is a pyromaniac? The variety of opinions, both professional and lay, are so diverse that a conclusive profile is not possible. However, the legal system as well as the medical profession have waivering criteria on which they base opinions. In considering the definition of pyromania, one must examine legal aspects, psychological viewpoints, and environmental impact. A survey of motivation, ties to sexuality plus special characteristics of the juvenile and female pyromaniac is also helpful in obtaining the broad spectrum of definitions.

In 1936, Common Law defined pyromania as "... the insane disposition to incendiarism", "... pathological arson..." and "... firesetting under an abnormal conditioned impulse by a person not determinably insane."¹ It is the very question of sanity as it relates to responsibility that is at the heart of the legal question. Should the pyromaniac be jailed or receive psychological treatment? Some experts would state that the impulse to set fires is uncontrollable and thus part of a mental illness instead of a cold criminal act. Others would argue that the pyromaniac is aware of his/her act and knows that it is wrong. These same experts would consider pyromaniacs as criminals to be delt with under the penal system. In either case, the jury and judge must deal with the task of defining pyromania and sentencing accordingly.²

Surveying psychological viewpoints of pyromania opens another vast area of discrepancy. It is the belief of Dr. Georgia Witkin-Lanoll that one must look at the underlying compulsions or impulses that drive the pyromaniacs to incendiarism. She postulates that there are three distinct categories or pyromaniacs: psychotic, psychopathic, and psychoneurotic.³ The reader must realize, however, that all pyromaniacs may not exhibit the full category of symptoms and that these divisions must be treated as guidelines vs harsh partitions.

Psychotic Fire Setter: This is related to an "... ego malfunction. That is, the capacity to test the reality of ideas or the appropriateness of behaviors seems distrubed. If there is a complete break or split from reality

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the psychotic personality is termed a schizophrenic. Thought disorders and hallucinations are associated with schizophrenia."⁴ An example cited by Dr. Witkin-Lanoil involves a young woman who sets fire to her own house endangering both her life and that of her young children to make her husband feel sorry for working nights or late hours. Such behavior seems to be lacking reality testing and suggests disordered thought processes.⁵ "Another symptom associated with psychosis is delusional thinking. A delusion is a belief not based on reality. If delusions are characterized by feelings of persecution, this type of psychosis is labelled paranoia. The paranoid schizophrenic might set a fire to wipe out or destroy an imagined enemy."⁶

Psychopathic Fire Setter: The psychopath is ". . . also known as a sociopath."⁷ "Without a functioning conscience, behavior is often anti-social, directed toward immediate gratification and hedonistic." They have a reduced capacity for guilt or empathy. "That is, their psychological functioning is well suited for fraud and social dirty work as a career. They might do things for money which social conscience would stop others from doing."⁸ For example, a paid torch derives no excitement from his/her fires. They are merely setting fire for monetary gain. The hedonistic impulsiveness of a psychopath may lead to the frustrated fireman syndrome. He will set a fire, report it, fight it and usually become the hero of the day.⁹

Psychoneurotic Fire Setters: The psychoneurotic personality disorder deals with ". . . fears either imaginary or real. These fears cause severe anxiety reactions which may be generalized, vague, or without focus."¹⁰ Understanding defense mechanisms can help explain the ways in which pyromaniacs may deal with this anxiety level. "One way in which the . . . personality . . . can defend against an impulse which would evoke guilt if carried out, . . . is to displace the impulse. For example, anger toward a parent may result in kicking the dog. Setting fires is also a defense mechanism."¹¹

Along with consideration of the pyromaniac's psychological condition, one must consider environmental background. By terminology, antecedent environmental conditions refers to those features of the immediate environment which may

contribute to the fire setting act. Antecedent conditions are important because behavior does not occur in a vacuum; it is related to the environment in which it develops. Behavior may recur when features of the environment in which it originally developed recur. Perhaps more importantly, certain types of environmental conditions maximize the likelihood of the development of deviate behavior patterns, and affect the environment. This reciprocal relationship between behavior and environment has a direct bearing on youthful firesetting. The fact is they tend to reside in distressed families. The family distress may be seen in a number of ways: "parental indifference, abuse and rejection. A number of studies have noted the high frequency with which the fathers were completely absent from the family."¹² ". . . suggested that firesetting may represent a symbolic identification and reuniting with the lost father."¹³

In contrast to the literature on children and adolescent firesetters, studies of adult firesetters have provided little specific information on the immediate environment of the pyromaniac. They do provide information on the rearing environments because patterns of divorce are generally apparent early in life. The adult firesetters were more likely to have been first born, last born or only children in their family rather than middle children. "Most studies show adult firesetters to have few marital ties and poor employment records."¹⁴

In studies in England, "Pyro's come primarily from urban backgrounds."¹⁵ "provided evidence that, for the United States as a whole, per capita rates of incendiary fires were highest for central cities."¹⁶ In most cases of firesetting, there are probably recent events which influence the firesetting act. It is important that we continue to research and examine these events systematically and carefully.

There is also conflict over the motivational forces of the pyromaniac. Are they rationally motivated or impulsive? Some authors and professionals in the field believe that it is usually rational because a planned pattern will result modeling the first success. The fact that pyromaniacs reported lighting fires for purposes of vengeance would also suggest rationality. The impulsive characteristics of some pyromaniacs would include the fact that they

use materials on the scene instead of carrying accelerants. The idea that pyromaniacs use arson as a tension-release valve or as a source of grandstand excitement would also suggest impulsiveness. The varying opinions here add to the lack of pin-point understanding.

The lack of understanding continues with the conflict over sexuality and its relation to pyromania. There is really no base to start from. Depending on what you read, what you hear, or what you see; nothing is the same. "Lewis and Yarnell (1951) reported that 15-20% of adult firesetters in their sample has some record of sexual delinquency, although there was no control group with which to compare these figures."¹⁷ "McKerracher and Dacre (1966) studied male arsonists and non-arsonists in a special security hospital, and found that 30% of the arsonists had committed sexual offenses compared with 50% of the non-arsonists."¹⁸ This shows that male arsonists have a lower rate of sexual offenses than non-arsonists at least in psychiatric populations.¹⁹

"Female arsonists in a psychiatric population show just the opposite result. A study done in 1971 reveals that female arsonists had more problems related to sexuality than did a control group of non-arsonists. About a third of the arsonists had a previous conviction for prostitution, and non-arsonists had none."²⁰

"Both male and female describe sexual excitement in watching the blaze and it is reported that some either masturbate during or directly after the fire."²¹ There is also a case where a firesetter collected woman's underclothing and left near a fire scene a female doll which was suspended head down with a cord tied around the feet. A hole had been burned through the genital area of the doll.²² This goes into the sadist with "phantasies such as putting men or animals to death through fire." Sadists of this type masturbate during the conflagration.²³

In consideration of definitions, it is helpful to look at some characteristics of specific subgroups of the population. As mentioned earlier, however, there are no hard and fast rules -- only simple observations. "The juvenile firesetter is usually motivated towards vandalism."²⁴ The majority of vandalism fires are

set by young people, generally between the ages of 12 and 25 years. These fires, which may have an underlying undiscovered motive, are responsible for some of our most devastating fire losses. There is little apparent purpose or reason for these acts except to burn something. "Fire targets vary in these juveniles but most prevalent properties are woodlands, schools and churches."

Lewis and Yarnell list common characteristics of the adolescent fire setter as having ". . . a history of delinquency, disruptive rearing environment, pathological personality development, sexual immaturity, aggressive or destructive behavior, poor social adjustment and emotional disturbance."²⁵ John Kennedy lists an adolescent pyro as often getting sexual thrills from general excitement of situation. Kennedy states they often cause false alarms early then graduate to the setting of fires.²⁶

The female firesetter may direct most of her firesetting towards her own property, possessions or premises and rarely against her employer. Generally described as older women who were lonely, unhappy and in despair; she seems to have more self-destructive tendencies. Lewis and Yarnell found ". . . a majority of women firesetters tested to be mentally defective with about 32% of those tested showed evidence of psychosis, primarily schizophrenic reactions."²⁷

The female often sets small fires, usually without use of accelerants. They usually use newspapers, magazines or anything available that is combustible and can be lighted with a match. Usually sets fire to mattress and always works alone. Kennedy states that a woman of this sort reacts physically and mentally from severe shock such as menopause, jealousy, revenge or a husband leaving. Kennedy also states there are relatively few true women pyromaniacs.

It is interesting to note the widespread opinions concerning the definition of the word pyromaniac. Are they sane or insane? Can they usually be held responsible for their actions? Does the pyromaniac lend to psychological categorization or motivation analysis? Can background or sexuality of the individual earmark the pyromaniac? The only justifiable conclusion is two fold:

- 1) more studies must be done
- 2) an exact profile of the pyromaniac is not understood at this time.

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FOOTNOTES

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