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Women and Arson: A Demographic Study

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ABSTRACT: This study describes women accused of setting fires in the City of New York who were evaluated between 1980 and 1983 at the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic for the New York Criminal and Supreme Courts. Consideration is given to their age, ethnicity, history of prior mental illness, abuse of controlled substances, economic status, family background, education, and employment. Their methodology, planning, and targeting for their firesetting behavior, as well as reported motivations for engaging in arson, are also considered.

KEYWORDS: psychiatry, arson, demography

As it is defined in the New York State Penal Law (Art. 150), arson is the causing of damage by fire or explosive to a building or a motor vehicle. There must be the intent to start a fire, and, with the exception of arson in the fourth degree, intent to cause damage. The law further defines intent (Art. 15.05) as the presence of a conscious objective to cause a result or to engage in conduct. Many recent studies of arson focus on a related factor which often implies intent, classifying firesetting behavior according to the motivation behind the crime. The presence or absence of motive, and type of motivation (political, interpersonal, economic, and so forth) form the basis of classification schemes for Lewis and Yarnell [1], Scott [2], Prins [3], and Boudreau [4], among others. It has also been proposed that when evaluating cases of arson, factors other than the immediately precipitating motivation must be taken into consideration. Vreeland and Waller [5] proposed a classification scheme based on groupings of factors associated with the firesetting event, including organic, environmental and behavioral variables.

When dealing with psychiatrically disturbed individuals, behavioral factors and personal background may be as important as motives. This paper will attempt to relate a classification scheme based on such factors to data on women evaluated in the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic between 1980 to 1983 on charges relating to firesetting.

Population

The population is a group of 27 women evaluated in the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic for the Criminal and Supreme Courts of New York City between 1980 and the first half of 1983.

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They had been referred to the Clinic by the courts and the Department of Probation on charges relating to the setting of fires. In response to requests from the Criminal and Supreme Courts, professional staff of the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic conduct diagnostic evaluations to determine if defendants are competent to proceed to trial. In response to requests from Department of Probation, diagnostic evaluations are prepared to assist the Court in the determination of appropriate sentencing for convicted defendants. Of the 27 women in this group, 15 (55%) had been referred for presentence evaluation, 7 (26%) for competency evaluation, and 5 (19%) for both types of evaluations. Supreme Court referrals accounted for 9 (33%) of the cases, and 16 of the 18 criminal court referrals were for indictable (felony) offenses, all arson (Table 1).

Defendants may be evaluated either while they are incarcerated in the custody of the New York City Department of Correction, or while they are on bail or released on their own recognizance pending adjudication. The majority of the population described here consists of defendants on some sort of community based status. Nineteen women (70%) had been released on bail before their psychiatric examination.

Data for this report were obtained from records in the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic, including preliminary probationary investigations, records of examination interviews, and court documents. Court records were further examined to obtain final disposition of cases.

Methods

This article is structured into two major and four minor subdivisions. Items descriptive of the individuals being discussed here are demographic factors (age, ethnicity, controlled substance abuse, and psychiatric history) and socioeconomic factors (family background, marital status, residential status, employment history, income, and education). The actual fire-setting events and the circumstances surrounding them are described in terms of behavioral factors (the victim of the blaze, type of structure or property set afire, whether the incident was planned, whether the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol, and the defendant's criminal record) and motivational factors (accidental versus revenge-oriented fires, fires set inappropriately to seek assistance for a problem, and fires set while suffering from depression or delusions).

The 27 women and their criminal behavior will be described according to these categories.

The Individuals: Demographic Factors

The average age of the women in this study was 34.7 years, (range 17 to 62), somewhat older than is generally found in populations previously studied in the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic [6-8]. The modal age group of 40 to 49-year-old women comprised 37% of the total population. Most of the population consisted of ethnic minorities, with 21 (78%) black, 5 (18%) hispanic, and only 1 (4%) white (Table 2).

Medically the women suffered from a predictable range of difficulties, including asthma (2), hypertension (3), diabetes (2), epilepsy (2), and blackouts (3). Sex-related problems in-

TABLE 1—*Defendants' incarceration status.*

Referred For	Incarcerated	In the Community	Total
Competency evaluation	3 (11%)	4 (15%)	7 (26%)
Probationary evaluation	3 (11%)	12 (44%)	15 (56%)
Both	2 (7%)	3 (11%)	5 (19%)
Total	8 (30%)	19 (70%)	27 (100%)

TABLE 2—*Defendants' reported ethnicity.*

Age ^a	Black	Hispanic	White	Total
Under 19	3 (11%)	0	0	3 (11%)
20-29	4 (15%)	3 (11%)	0	7 (26%)
30-39	6 (22%)	0	0	6 (22%)
40-49	7 (26%)	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	10 (37%)
Over 50	1 (4%)	0	0	1 (4%)
Total	21 (78%)	5 (19%)	1 (4%)	27 (100%)

^aMean age 34.7 years.

cluded a history of venereal disease (3), miscarriage (2), abortion (1), hysterectomy (1), tubal ligation (1), and breast surgery (2). Three of the women had been prostitutes.

Problems of alcohol abuse are fairly commonly reported among firesetting populations and this group of women is no exception. Fifteen of the women (55%) reported that they were or had been alcoholics or heavy drinkers; thirteen indicated they still had a problem with alcohol abuse. Only four of these women reported ever having been through a detoxification program. Of these four, two reported going through alcohol detoxification at least five times each. Five of the alcohol abusers, and one nonalcoholic woman, reported being drunk at the time they committed the firesetting offense (Table 3).

Five of the alcohol abusers reported that they also had difficulties with drug abuse. Including a sixth woman with no reported alcohol problem, 22% of the population had histories of drug abuse. Marijuana, cocaine, "pills," angel dust, heroin, and methadone were used by these women to get high. The only one who reported an attempt at heroin detoxification was the nonalcoholic woman; she had been through two detoxification programs. In addition, five women reported that they were "occasional" or "social" drinkers, two that they used marijuana or valium occasionally.

A history of mental illness, particularly in conjunction with firesetting behavior, will almost invariably trigger a court-ordered psychiatric evaluation of a criminal defendant. Therefore it is no surprise that 63% of this population is reported to have some history of psychiatric hospitalization (Table 4). Six women (22%) reported either long-term or multiple inpatient admissions; eleven women (41%) reported short-term, acute care, or incidental admissions (two for alcoholism treatment, one for drug detoxification, and two for suicide attempts). Of the 17 women with inpatient histories, 11 reported also using some sort of outpatient psychiatric services. Two women had no history of hospitalization, but had been treated as psychiatric outpatients.

Psychiatric diagnostic impressions were available or deduced from professional case notes on all but three of the cases reported here (Table 5). None of the women were diagnosed as

TABLE 3—*Defendants' history of drug and alcohol abuse.*

Age	Only Alcohol Abuse	Only Drug Abuse	Both	Neither	Total
Under 19	...	...	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	3 (11%)
20-29	5 (19%)	1 (4%)	...	1 (4%)	7 (26%)
30-39	2 (7%)	...	3 (11%)	1 (4%)	6 (22%)
40-49	3 (11%)	...	...	7 (26%)	10 (37%)
Over 50	...	...	...	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Total	10 (37%)	1 (4%)	5 (19%)	11 (41%)	27 (100%)

TABLE 4—*Defendants' history of psychiatric treatment by age.*

Age	Inpatient			
	Multiple or Long-Term	Short-Term	Outpatient	None
Under 19	...	3 ^a	1	...
20-29	1	1	4	3
30-39	1	2	3	3
40-49	4	5 ^b	5	1
Over 50	...	...	...	1
Total	6	11	13	8

^a1—Subsequent to drug abuse—reaction to marijuana and PCP.

^b2—Alcohol detoxification—multiple short-term admissions and 2—subsequent to suicide attempts.

TABLE 5—*Psychiatric diagnoses and treatment history.*

DSM-III Diagnosis	Inpatient				Total ^a
	Long-Term or Multiple	Short-Term or Incidental	Outpatient	None	
Schizophrenic disorders (295)	3 (11%)	3 (11%)	4 (15%)	1 (4%)	7 (26%)
Personality disorders (301)	0	5 (19%)	3 (11%)	4 (15%)	9 (33%)
Substance abuse—organic and other (291, 305)	1 (4%)	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	0	3 (11%)
Adjustment disorders (309)	0	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	0	1 (4%)
Paranoid disorders (297)	0	0	0	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Psychotic disorders (298)	0	0	1 (4%)	0	1 (4%)
Affective disorders (296)	0	0	1 (4%)	0	1 (4%)
Impulse control (312)	1 (4%)	0	1 (4%)	0	1 (4%)
Diagnosis deferred (799.90)	1 (4%)	0	1 (4%)	2 (7%)	3 (11%)
Total	6 (22%)	11 (41%)	13 (48%)	8 (30%)	27 (100%)

^aSome defendants reported both inpatient and outpatient histories.

suffering from pyromania as defined by the American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III* (312.33):

recurrent failure to resist impulses to set fires and intense fascination with setting fires and seeing items burn. Before setting the fire, the individual experiences a buildup of tension; and once the fire is underway, he or she experiences intense pleasure or release . . . They may be indifferent to the consequences of the fire for life or property, or they may get satisfaction from the resulting destruction.

The predominant diagnostic category was personality disorder, on Axis II, with 33% of the cases. Four women had atypical personality disorders, four had borderline personality disorders, and one had a schizotypal personality disorder. (Three of these nine women also had Axis I diagnoses—two were adjustment disorders and one opioid dependence.)

The second largest diagnostic category was the schizophrenic disorders, with 26% of the population. Four women were paranoid schizophrenics; three were residual types. Substance use and abuse accounted for three of the diagnoses, two organic dementia with chronic alcoholism, one nonorganic alcohol abuse. One woman each experienced adjustment disorders, paranoid disorders, psychotic disorders, affective disorders, and disorders of impulse control.

The Individuals: Socioeconomic Factors

As has been noted above, the average age of the group of women studied here is somewhat higher than the average age of a group of women studied previously who had been charged with a broader spectrum of crimes [8]. This difference of an average of 6 years (first group 28.6 years mean age; second group 34.7 years mean age) is reflected in the data on the women's residential and economic situation.

Investigation of the women's current source of income or financial support revealed that only one woman was being supported by her family, in this instance by her common-law husband; none were supported by parents or older relatives. This contrasts with the previous study in which 18% were supported by employed family members. Nearly 75% of the group were supported by public funds, with 48% on welfare and 26% on SSI. All told, 50% were over 30 years old and publicly supported (Table 6). Only 3 women (11% of the group) all in the 40 to 49-year-old age group, reported current employment. Eighteen women (67%) reported having been employed at one time or another in their lives. This included two who had had summer jobs while in school, five who had worked as part-time or short-term waitresses, and one retiree. Six women, all under age forty had never worked (Table 7).

Employment history also correlates fairly predictably with educational background (Table 8). All six of the women who reported never having worked in their lives had dropped out of school before the completion of high school. Of the three women who were employed at the

TABLE 6—*Income source.*

Age	Defendant Supported By					Total
	Welfare/ Publ. Asst.	SSI	Employed	Family	None/Unk.	
Under 19	3 (11%)	0	0	0	0	3 (11%)
20-29	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	0	1 (4%)	2 (7%)	7 (26%)
30-39	6 (22%)	0	0	0	0	6 (22%)
40-49	2 (7%)	5 (19%)	3 (11%)	0	0	10 (37%)
Over 50	0	0	0	0	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Total	13 (48%)	7 (26%)	3 (11%)	1 (4%)	3 (11%)	27 (100%)

TABLE 7—*Employment history.*

Age	Never Employed	Previously Employed	Currently Employed	Total
Under 19	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	...	3 (11%)
20-29	3 (11%)	4 (15%)	...	7 (26%)
30-39	1 (4%)	5 (19%)	...	6 (22%)
40-49	...	7 (26%)	3 (11%)	10 (37%)
Over 50	...	1 (4%)	...	1 (4%)
Total	6 (22%)	18 (67%)	3 (11%)	27 (100%)

TABLE 8—*Education by employment history.*

Years of School	Never Employed	Previously Employed	Employed at Time of Arrest	Total
Less than 8 years	1 (4%)	5 (19%)	...	6 (22%)
9-11 years	5 (19%)	6 (22%)	...	11 (41%)
GED or high school grad.	...	5 (19%)	1 (4%)	6 (22%)
Some college	...	2 ^a (7%)	1 (4%)	3 (11%)
College grad.	...	...	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Total	6 (22%)	18 (67%)	3 (11%)	27 (100%)

^aIncludes one retiree.

time of their arrest, one was a college graduate, one had completed 1½ years of college, and one was a high school graduate. Of the 10 women who had at least obtained a General Educational Degree (GED), only 3 were under 40 years old. The bulk of the younger women had not completed their educations.

With regard to marital status, most of the women in the group reported being single (56%). Nineteen percent of the women were divorced, ten percent separated, and only seven percent (four women) were married at the time of their arrest (Table 9). Another variable which seemed to correlate with age was the current residence of the defendant (Table 10). All of the younger women (under 30 years old) lived either with parents or adult relatives, or with spouses. Six of the seventeen older women reportedly lived alone. Two women lived with spouses (including common-law). One 30-year-old lived with her mother, and 2 women lived in institutional settings. Three of the older women reported living only with their children. With regard to their own natal family background (Table 11), only six of the women were raised in an intact home with both natural parents present until the defendant was at least 10 years old. Ten women (37%) were raised by one parent alone (nine by their mother, one by her father), three women (11%) were raised by grandparents, and six women (22%) were in institutional (2) or foster (3) or adopted (1) homes. Sixteen of the women (59%) reported having children of their own, yet only in six cases did the children live with their mothers. Three of seven mothers under thirty years old had their children living with them. Two of the four mothers who lived with spouses (including common-law) did not have their children living with them. Of the ten instances in which the children did not live with their mothers, two represent cases of grown, adult children who had moved out of the home. The remaining eight were children who were living with other relatives or in-laws or in placements established by the state in foster care or group or adoptive homes (Table 12).

TABLE 9—*Marital status.*

Age	Single	Married	Separated ^a	Divorced	Total
Under 19	3 (11%)	0	0	0	3 (11%)
20-29	5 (19%)	0	0	2 (7%)	7 (26%)
30-39	4 (15%)	1 (4%)	0	1 (4%)	6 (22%)
40-49	3 (11%)	0	5 (19%)	2 (7%)	10 (37%)
Over 50	0	1 (4%)	0	0	1 (4%)
Total	15 (56%)	2 (7%)	5 (19%)	5 (19%)	27 (100%)

^aIncludes women separated from common-law husbands.

TABLE 10—*Current residence by age.*

Age	Alone	With Children	With Spouse or C/L	Parent or Adult Relative	Institutional	Other Unknown	Total
Under 19	...	...	...	3 (11%)	...	...	3 (11%)
20-29	...	...	3 (11%)	4 (15%)	...	...	7 (26%)
30-39	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	6 (22%)
40-49	5 (19%)	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	...	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	10 (37%)
Over 50	...	...	1 (4%)	...	...	...	1 (4%)
Total	6 (22%)	3 (11%)	6 (22%)	8 (30%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	27 (100%)

TABLE 11—*Family background: natal family.*

	No.	Percent
Intact home ^a	6	22
Raised by one parent	10	37
Raised by other related adult	3	11
Institutional/foster care	6	22
Unknown	2	7
Total	27	100

^aIntact home—both natural parents were present in the home until the defendant was at least ten years old.

TABLE 12—*Family background: children.*

Defendant Lives	No Children	Children Live with Defendant	Children Live Elsewhere	Unknown	Total
With no other adult	0	3 (11%)	3 (11%)	3 (11%)	9 (33%)
With spouse or C. L.	1 (4%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	6 (22%)
With parent or adult relative	4 (15%)	1 (4%)	3 (11%)	0	8 (30%)
Treatment facility/institutional	0	0	2 (7%)	0	2 (7%)
Other/unknown	0	0	0	2 (7%)	2 (7%)
Total	5 (19%)	6 (22%)	10 (37%)	6 (22%)	27 (100%)

The Firesetting Event: Behavioral Factors

Behavioral factors are external variables, descriptive of the actual incident, the actions of the defendant in implementing the firesetting activity, and factors which may have influenced the defendant's behavior.

The firesetting behavior can be considered to have been accidental, planned, or "impulsive," that is, a triggered response to a particular situation (Table 13). Of the five women who claimed that the fires which they caused were accidents, three were in fact convicted of attempted arson, calling their claim into doubt. Six cases could be identified as having been preplanned, all but one of these involving flammable liquids which the women transported to the scene of the fire. Most of these fires caused damage to the property of some other person or persons. Impulsive acts of firesetting, on the other hand, were more likely to

TABLE 13—*Firesetting behavior.*

	Preplanned	Impulsive	Accidental	Total
Defendant's apt./home/room	1 (4%)	8 (30%)	3 (11%)	12 (44%)
Common space in def's residence (hall, lobby, and so forth)	0	4 (15%)	0	4 (15%)
Others apt./home/room	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	5 (19%)
Common space in other's residence (hall, lobby and so forth)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	3 (11%)
Nonresidential	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	0	3 (11%)
Total	6 (22%)	16 (59%)	5 (19%)	27 (100%)

damage the defendant's own property. In eight out of sixteen incidents, impulsively set fires affected the personal living space of the woman who set them, either her own apartment or her room in the family apartment. Four other women started fires on impulse in the public spaces of buildings in which they lived—hallways, common rooms, and lobbies.

The use of flammable liquids—gasoline, benzine, kerosene, and, in one case, a molotov cocktail—was most common in the firesetting behavior observed here (seven cases) (Table 14). Three fires were started supposedly by accident with lit cigarettes. One began when a woman used a flare as a weapon to defend herself from attack. Three women set fires in garbage piles, two stoves caught fire. Other flammable materials which were ignited to begin the fires included articles of clothing, welcome mats, and furniture. Almost half of the women (48%) stayed at the scene of the fire as it burned. It is assumed, although not absolutely evident from the case histories, that most did not report the fires to the authorities themselves.

Another behavioral factor which is considered here is the women's prior arrest record. Of the 27 women in the study, 14 (52%) had at least 1 previous arrest. Only three of these, however, were for arson charges. Except for two women who were multiple offenders, most (12) of the 14 women had been arrested only 1 or 2 times previously. Seven of the twenty-one prior arrest charges were for assault (multiple offenders are not included here). This suggests that these women could have used firesetting as an alternative outlet for their aggressive behavior.

Available data seems to indicate that the younger women are more likely to set fires on impulse rather than to plan the act of arson. Older women tended also to act impulsively; however, when motivated to do so they did plan specific acts of destructive firesetting (Table 15).

TABLE 14—*Method by nature of behavior.*

Method	Preplanned	Impulsive	Accidental	Total
Flammable liquid	5 (19%)	0	1 (4%)	6 (22%)
Cigarettes	0	1 (4%)	2 (7%)	3 (11%)
Garbage	0	3 (11%)	0	3 (11%)
Stove	0	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	2 (7%)
Furniture	0	2 (7%)	0	2 (7%)
Clothing	0	2 (7%)	0	2 (7%)
Miscellaneous	0	3 (11%)	1 (4%)	4 (15%)
Unknown	1 (4%)	4 (15%)	0	5 (19%)
Total	6 (22%)	16 (59%)	5 (19%)	27 (100%)

TABLE 15—Age of defendant by nature of behavior.

Age	Preplanned	Impulsive	Accidental	Total
Under 19	0	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	3 (11%)
20-29	1 (4%)	6 (22%)	0	7 (26%)
30-39	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	6 (22%)
40-49	2 (7%)	6 (22%)	2 (7%)	10 (37%)
Over 50	1 (4%)	0	0	1 (4%)
Total	6 (22%)	16 (59%)	5 (19%)	27 (100%)

The Firesetting Event: Motivational Factors

Motivation, the conscious or unconscious urging that brings on firesetting behavior, has been a major focus of study for investigations of arson for some time. Motive is never really clear, even in cases of arson for profit or politically motivated arson. What kind of person becomes a hired "torch"? What prompts an activist to choose fire as a means to political ends? When examining types of motives which are even less explicit, the classification problem becomes greater. In this paper, motives are grouped into seven basic categories which are defined as follows:

Anger: The expression of hostility; no other observable motive. Three cases are classified here.

Anger/revenge: Hostility directed at an individual or institution, as a reaction to a particular incident, with the intention of "getting even" or obtaining revenge for a perceived wrong. Ten cases are in this category.

"Cry for help"/inappropriate situational response: Setting a fire to attract attention either to an anxiety-provoking situation or to a personal problem. Usually, the problem could be appropriately handled in other ways, but delusions or mental illness interfere with the defendant's thought processes. Four cases.

Depression/"cry for help"/repressed anger: Attention-seeking behavior triggered by depression. Intentionally self-destructive. Three cases.

Accidental/unintentional: No discernible motivation or intent to start the fires. Three cases.

When evaluated with regard to age of the defendants, no clear trend emerges (Table 16). The most obvious point to be made from the data is that the anger/revenge motivation seems not to be age-related at all. Delusional behavior or behavior intended to bring assistance

TABLE 16—Defendant's motive by age of defendant.

Motive	Age					Total
	Under 19	20-29	30-39	40-49	Over 50	
Anger	...	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	...	...	3 (11%)
Anger/revenge	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	3 (11%)	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	10 (37%)
Anger/revenge/delusional	...	...	...	4 (15%)	...	4 (15%)
Cry for help/inappropriate response	...	...	1 (4%)	3 (11%)	...	4 (15%)
Depression/cry for help/anger	...	3 (11%)	...	...	...	3 (11%)
Accidental/unintentional	1 (4%)	...	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	...	3 (11%)
Total	3 (11%)	7 (26%)	6 (22%)	10 (37%)	1 (4%)	27 (100%)

TABLE 17—*Defendant's motive by nature of behavior.*

Motive	Planned	Impulsive	Accidental	Total
Anger	0	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	3 (11%)
Anger/revenge	5 (19%)	5 (19%)	0	10 (37%)
Anger/revenge/delusional	1 (4%)	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	4 (15%)
Cry for help/inappropriate response	0	4 (15%)	0	4 (15%)
Depression/cry for help/anger	0	3 (11%)	0	3 (11%)
Accidental/unintentional	0	0	3 (11%)	3 (11%)
Total	6 (22%)	16 (59%)	5 (19%)	27 (100%)

seem to be characteristic of the older women, while depression seems to characterize the younger ones.

While the impulsive firesetting acts span the entire motivational range, all of the planned acts of arson were motivated by anger and revenge. Again, firesetting becomes an alternative to direct confrontation for these women (Table 17).

Conclusions

Based on the grouped data presented here, a profile of the "typical" female firesetter referred to a forensic psychiatry clinic could be as follows.

Demographically, she would be somewhat older than the usual defendant (in her mid-thirties), black, and with a history of alcohol abuse compounded by drug abuse. She would have a diagnosable mental illness, probably a personality disorder or schizophrenia, and a history of inpatient treatment for that disorder. Her socio-economic background would indicate that she was undereducated, had at one time in her life held a job but was now relying on the public assistance program for income. She was brought up in a home in which one or both parents were missing, and has probably never married. Although she may have children, they probably do not reside with her.

These women set fire to the places where they lived, either their apartments or the common, public spaces of their buildings. They tended to act impulsively, responding to a perceived wrong committed against them or a perceived threat to their persons. While the planned acts of firesetting were implemented with flammable liquids, the impulsive ones seemed to make use of whatever was handy and burnable—garbage, clothing, furniture, and so forth. The women were motivated primarily by anger or revenge or both, and did not seem to find sexual stimulation or satisfaction in the fires. They seemed to use arson as a weapon, a substitute for direct confrontation and assault, to avenge themselves, to "get even," or to get someone to pay attention to their needs. Their acts were not those of the classic pyromaniac, but rather those of the disillusioned or frustrated individual who may have on other occasions turned to assault or robbery (most had previous arrest records) but who used fire because it was convenient or the first thing that came to mind or hand. As an indirect expression of aggression and hostility, arson becomes a substitute for other forms of antisocial behavior and not a psychosexual end in itself. The choice of fire instead of, for instance, violent personal assault, may be related to an inability to confront others directly. Whether this inability is sex-specific (related to a woman's supposed passive role in society) should be further explored through analysis of comparable data on male defendants accused of setting fires.

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