

# COPYCAT ARSON

By

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Copycat: *noun* 1. a child who copies another's work 2. a slavish imitator – *adjective* 3. similar to or imitative of some other occurrence: *copycat murder* (Delbridge et al., 2001).

**Abstract:** *The idea of copycat arson has been raised by the media whenever a spate of similar fires occurs in an area. But the evidence for this notion is limited. The difficulties associated with researching copycat crime mean not a lot is known about the phenomenon, including whether or not it even exists. Even less is known about copycat arson because arson is not one of the main crime-types that have been investigated by copycat crime researchers to date. Accordingly, this paper is, by necessity, an exploration of the notion of copycat arson rather than an exposition of the relevant literature. The intention is to extract salient features from what is known about the phenomenon of copycat crime and apply them to what is known about arson. On this basis some implications for future research will be considered.*

“Copycat”, “imitation” and “contagion” are terms that have been used interchangeably throughout the literature to refer to behaviour that has been inspired by a previously witnessed act. Traditionally research in this area has focused on the effect of suicide stories relayed in visual and print media on subsequent suicide rates. As a result, the impact of media reporting and portrayals of suicide incidents on actual suicide behaviour has been widely recognised (O’Carroll & Potter, 1994; Phillips, Lesyna, & Paight, 1992; Stack, 1987). In fact the issue has become so concerning that recommendations have been made for the responsible reporting of violent incidents of this kind (Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003). While the exact nature of the effect has yet to be clarified<sup>1</sup>, the evidence for a copycat phenomenon for suicide appears to be substantial<sup>2</sup>. Less clear is whether this effect can be generalised to crime.

## Copycat Crime

A clear definition of copycat crime is somewhat elusive but probably best explained by Ray Surette, a criminologist who has been exploring this issue since the mid-1980’s. He states that for a crime to be considered copycat not only must there be an aspect of the original crime incorporated in its undertaking (such as in the choice of victim, motive, or technique) but, more significantly, there needs to be the key element of media publicity and exposure to the media coverage as a yoking mechanism between the crimes (Surette, 1998). That is, the key implied element of a copycat crime (as distinct from a non-

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<sup>1</sup> There is some debate in the suicide literature as to whether publicized stories affect the rate of actual suicidal behaviour or only the method chosen by people who would have suicided anyway (Stack, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive review of the literature see Pirkis and Blood (2001).

copycat crime) is that, beyond mere similarities in *modus operandi*, the copycat crime would not exist (at least in its current form) without the intervening media attention.

There is some controversy over whether in fact a copycat phenomenon exists although a recent review found that a preponderance of evidence for a copycat effect albeit at an unknown rate (Surette, 2002). Commentators (including the media themselves; see Turnbull, 1997) have highlighted the potential for media to influence criminal process, often depicting journalists as jostling for position as an incident unfolds, getting in the way of the authorities and frequently releasing unauthorised details of the crime that may compromise subsequent investigations (Turnbull, 1997). Certainly, there are anecdotal reports that in some cases media involvement has hindered the effective handling of an incident, particularly concerning the delicate negotiations in sieges involving hostages (Munday, 1994). Links between media reports of armed robberies or incidents of mass murder and subsequent increases in the rates of these crimes have also been highlighted (Cantor, Sheehan, Alpers, & Mullen, 1999).

But for every account of copycat crime there is another that denies its existence (Clarke & McGrath, 1992; Stack, 1989), a position endorsed by the justice system which has so far refused to hold “the media liable for acts performed by media consumers” (Surette, 1998, p. 138). The contradictory results of research in this area could be attributed in part to certain methodological issues associated with copycat crime studies.

One of the main difficulties in exploring this issue is the problematic matter of identifying a pair of crimes that is media-linked. Researchers tend to rely on the ability (and willingness) of offenders to: a) admit their crimes, and; b) acknowledge the source of their “inspiration” as being media-related. However, self-report data is notoriously unreliable in criminological research generally (Petersilia, 1980) and represents some specific difficulties for copycat researchers (Cantor et al., 1999). Differences across studies in terms of research variables examined may also account for the lack of clarity in the literature. For instance, in his recent meta-analysis of 293 published research findings concerning media impacts on suicide Stack (2000) found certain study characteristics were more strongly associated than others with results supportive of a copycat effect. Based on multivariate logistic regression analysis the single strongest predictor of a copycat effect was the presence of a celebrity or well-known person in the original suicide story, while in the main observer characteristics were unrelated to the odds of finding a copycat effect.

### **Theoretical Explanations**

Assuming a copycat phenomenon exists, exactly how the media might influence subsequent viewer behaviour has yet to be established. Several theories have been proposed to explain the association between media coverage of suicide and subsequent suicidal behaviour but methodological and theoretical limitations restrict the extent to which they may be considered useful<sup>3</sup>. In an attempt to simplify many of the theoretical considerations Surette (1990) proposed a model of copycat crime describing the interaction between several factors such as the initial crime, media coverage, socio-

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<sup>3</sup> For a review of theoretical explanations of the copycat effect see Pirkis & Blood (2001).

environmental elements, and observer characteristics. In the same way that the manner in which the media might influence suicidal behaviour is still not clear, there is some doubt as to how a copycat effect might influence subsequent criminal behaviour. Surette argues for two possible explanations. On the one hand, the media might trigger individuals to commit certain crimes as well as criminalize those who would otherwise be law-abiding citizens. In this manner media reports of certain criminal actions could influence the *amount* of crime that is committed.

Alternatively, media might serve to influence the *way* in which crime is committed. Surette (1990) suggests that by providing extensive and detailed coverage of criminal acts the media enables existing criminals to modify and refine their techniques. In this way people are not necessarily being influenced to carry out new crime types, but to undertake their existing criminal acts in a more educated and potentially sophisticated manner. Thus the media influence is to mould the *quality* of crime without actually increasing the *quantity* of criminal acts in the community. The limited data available suggests more support for the quality of crime model than for the criminogenic model, although this could be an artefact of the adult offender populations commonly used in copycat research (Surette, 1998).

### **Classification Efforts**

In an effort to clarify the copycat process Pease and Love (1984) reviewed an unspecified number of incidents which they considered to be copycat crimes. Using a mix of personal characteristics, offence features and motive-related variables, these authors described four “types” of copycat criminals based on similarities gleaned from anecdotal reports. *Mode copiers* are individuals who refine their existing criminal activities on the basis of techniques learned via the media. *Groups of copiers* are copycat criminals who act in groups as opposed to individually. *Mentally ill or deficient copiers* are those who appear to be mentally deficient in some way, while *terrorists and threateners* copy particularly frightening crimes in order to generate fear within the community. The latter group include people who imitate extortion cases, such as in food contamination threats.

The purpose of any classification system is to reduce a complex whole to more manageable parts in order that it may be better understood. Pease and Love’s (1984) study represents the first effort to develop a classification system of copycat criminals and by the authors own admission represents an early attempt to impose order on what is essentially an opaque process. The value of the system proposed by these authors, however, is undermined by the lack of distinction between the categories. None of the four categories described appear to be mutually exclusive and accordingly provide limited assistance in categorising copycat criminals. Nevertheless, Pease and Love’s classification effort remains unique as no other published studies to date have attempted to improve on this initial endeavour<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Surette (personal communication, September 13, 2003) suggests an alternative classification system based on nature of crime (e.g., violent versus property) and motive (e.g., instrumental versus expressive). He notes that copycat criminals could differ by crime type copied or differ on their focus (e.g., to copy techniques or motivations). Surette highlights the fact that “the literature, especially the popular literature, writes about copy cat criminals as if it’s been established that they are a monolithic population”.

### **Who's "At-Risk"?**

One of the critical points made by Pease and Love (1984) was the necessity of obtaining information about the initial perpetrator and the initial event, as well as characteristics of the observer (that is, the copycat criminal) in order to develop a useful theory of copycat crime. Subsequently, investigations into copycat suicide in particular have borne out this prophesy. Researchers have reported the suicide contagion effect to be modulated by demographic characteristics of the initial victim (e.g., Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Ostroff & Boyd, 1987; Stack, 1987; Wasserman, 1984), while others have focused on the influence of certain characteristics of the observer (Hassan, 1995; O'Connor & Potter, 1994). Unfortunately, copycat crime researchers appear to have been somewhat slower to adopt this approach. One exception is a report of a detailed analysis of the characteristics of individuals who might be susceptible ("at-risk") to a copycat effect for criminal behaviour.

Surette's (1990) review of relevant studies found the copycat crime phenomenon is strongest for people who are already involved in criminal activities and who often have prior criminal records for violence-related offences. According to this analysis, between 20% and 40% of the population of existing criminals could be influenced to refine their criminal techniques by media although, based on his reading of the anecdotal and empirical evidence, Surette concludes that it would be rare, but not unheard of, for a non-criminal individual to commit copycat crimes.

More recently, Surette (2002) conducted a detailed examination of the characteristics of "at-risk" copycat criminals with a survey of 68 incarcerated male offenders aged 15 to 17 years. Demographically, the typical respondent was a Black youth aged 16.5 years with a record of academic underachievement and an extensive violent and criminal history. Each offender completed a survey designed to measure self-reported copycat behaviour and to examine the correlates of self-reported copycat crime.

The results were interesting. Approximately 40% of the sample admitted to some copycat activity with about 10% admitting to a substantial amount of copycat crime (Surette, 2002). As a group, these juveniles tended to rate media influence on their criminal behaviour patterns as relatively insignificant. However, there was a small proportion of the population who reported the media to be particularly socially and personally influential, and these individuals tended to be at greater risk for having committed copycat crime.

When the factors and characteristics associated with copycat activities were examined it was found that, for this sample of juveniles, common demographic variables were not useful in discriminating between copycat offenders and non-copycat offenders (Surette, 2002). In contrast to earlier studies there was no relationship found between copycat activity and greater consumption of media, low academic aptitude or performance, or specific crime types (with the exception of gun offences, where it was reported juveniles involved in gun crimes were more likely to report copycat activities). Surette reports that the small group of consistent copycat offenders in the sample could only be reliably

differentiated on the basis of the perceptions they hold of the media. That is, these individuals were more likely than non-copycat offenders to credit ideas from friends and the media as being important factors in explaining why they commit crime.

This study is exploratory and, as such, care should be taken when generalising from these findings. The development of a theoretical model of juvenile copycat crime will go some way towards making sense of the patterns that emerged in this exploratory analysis. In the meantime, the study has raised some interesting propositions. For example, Surette (2002) postulates the existence of “a juvenile copycat personality” (p. 63) as an individual who looks beyond him / herself for criminal inspiration and is influenced by social role models and the media. Further investigation of this notion is required before the idea of a copycat personality can be generally accepted, however, if found to be supported by additional empirical evidence it raises the possibility of screening and intervention techniques being developed to address this specific personality type.

### **Copycat Arson**

Although claims of copycat arson are relatively common in the popular media, an extensive review of the literature has found few empirical studies exploring this issue. One exception is Morgan, Cook, Dorkins, and Doyle's (1995) analysis of several firesetting incidents which they claim represent a series of copycat arsons. Ultimately in their analysis and discussion Morgan et al. fail to adequately demonstrate whether and how the fires lit by each of the six individuals studied are linked beyond the fact that all the fires occurred in one Unit (two wards) of the hospital and at a time when at least one of the previous arson offenders was an inpatient.

A series of 8 fires lit by 6 patients over a 23 day period across 2 wards of a psychiatric hospital was reviewed (Morgan et al., 1995). Despite the reference to copycat effects, the evidence presented for the existence of a copycat phenomenon in this instance was limited at best. The brief statistical analysis reported in the study found the series of fires represented a statistically significant increase in the rate of accidental and malicious fires previously recorded, although it was unclear whether the comparison data related to only the two wards involved in the current series or included fire reports for the entire institution. This type of statistical pattern, while potentially relevant for hospital administrators, does not in itself suggest a copycat effect.

Further, as well as highlighting the sudden increase in rate of firesetting behaviour in the institution as symptomatic of imitative behaviour, Morgan et al. (1995) suggested the frequency of fires indicated an element of contagion in this series. But the singular fact that several fires occurred in relative temporal proximity is not indicative of a copycat phenomenon operating. By definition a copycat arson must demonstrate elements inspired from an earlier observed firesetting act. In Morgan et al.'s study the description of both the initial and subsequent firesetting behaviour is limited and no attempt appears to have been made to establish points of similarity between the characteristics of either the offenders or their firesetting behaviour which might indicate a copycat effect.

Finally, the time span covered in Morgan et al.'s (1995) study is problematic. Some authors have contended a copycat effect can exist for any period between 3 days up to 10 years after the initial report, depending on a variety of situational and personal factors and the type of crime involved (Cantor et al., 1999). Accordingly, the time-frame of this study appears rather arbitrary and it is not clearly established whether these fires are part of an ongoing series of copycat arsons, whether they represent the start of a series of copycat fires, or even whether there is a copycat element in the series at all.

As a reference for copycat arson obviously Morgan et al.'s (1995) study is problematic because it fails to adequately highlight the link between the fires that demonstrates a contagion effect. While there is the possibility this sequence of fires might represent a series of copycat arsons, it seems equally probable that it may simply be describing a series of sequential but independent firesetting events. An extensive literature search has failed to locate further studies of copycat arson, although several media reports of alleged copycat fires were evident.

### **The “Typical” Arsonist**

Arsonists are obscure characters. Relatively little is known of their habits and behaviours or about how these individuals differ, if at all, from other types of offenders. It is worth mentioning that the term used to describe individuals who set fires varies throughout the literature. Synonyms for non-accidental firesetters include arsonists, firebugs, vandals and pyromaniacs. The language used tends to reflect the perspective of the user, with different terminology appearing across medical, legal and popular contexts (Barker, 1994). Ultimately, however, the different terms all refer to the same thing, that is an individual who deliberately lights fires, and all have a pejorative connotation.

Arson is predominantly committed by males, a trend which is consistent with patterns of participation in criminal activity generally (Farrington, 1996). Stewart (1993) quotes a ratio of 6:1 male to female arsonists based on crime and criminal statistics, and most studies involving a random sampling of arsonists have found approximately 80% or more are males (Bradford, 1982; Leong, 1992; Puri, Baxter, & Cordess, 1995; Rasanen, Hirvenoja, Hakko, & Vaisanen, 1994; Soothill & Pope, 1973). In general, arson is committed most often by adolescents, but with a recorded age range of 4 to 73 years (Baker, 1994) it is undoubtedly a crime that is accessible at any age.

The background of most arson offenders is consistently reported as deficient. They often have a dysfunctional family setting with one or both parents absent. They may have been abused and / or neglected as a child. This is a similar pattern to offenders generally and, like most offenders, arsonists are also reported as typically being socially and educationally disadvantaged (Koson & Dvoskin, 1982; O'Sullivan & Kelleher, 1987), socially maladjusted (Geller, 1987; Inciardi, 1970; Rice & Harris, 1991), and substance abusers (Inciardi, 1970). Many arson samples are described as mentally deficient (Levin, 1976; Rasanen et al., 1994; Stewart, 1993; Vreeland, 1980) although in her review of the literature Barker (1994) found that “arsonists on the whole are not mentally ill” (p. 49). Where mental illness is evident the most common diagnoses are schizophrenia, mental retardation, and personality disorder.

In terms of their criminality most arson research has considered the offending histories of arsonists only to the extent that it provides background information to the study population. One notable exception is the comprehensive study conducted by Soothill and Pope (1973), the value of which lies in the exceptionally long follow-up period (20 years). Many arsonists have prior criminal convictions (Repo, 1998; Sapsford, Banks, & Smith, 1978; Barnett, Richter, & Renneberg, 1999). In fact, while some authors have concluded that arsonists tend to have unintensified criminal careers (Foust, 1979), others have supported a pattern of a low rate of arson recidivism but a higher rate of reoffending in other crime types, particularly property-based crime (Barnett & Spitzer, 1994; Hill et al., 1982; Hurley & Monahan, 1969; Soothill & Pope, 1973).

### **The “At-Risk” Arsonist**

Overall, the general picture of the arsonist is one of an individual with significant maladaptive behavioural patterns, of which firesetting is but one. Extrapolating from the relevant, albeit limited, research into variables associated with copycat crime it may be suggested that individuals with a prior criminal history (particularly for property crime), low academic achievement, and high rates of media consumption might be particularly vulnerable to a contagion effect (Surette, 1990). More recently, the individual’s attitude toward the media and peers has been postulated as one of the more significant influences in copycat behaviour (Surette, 2002) although this dimension has yet to be explored in relation to arsonists. Reaching further into related but non-copycat literature, links have been established between media and aggression particularly for individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are young, angry, and have a poor academic record (Surette, 2002). Many of these characteristics are relevant in a discussion of arsonists. While a picture of the “typical” arsonist is difficult to obtain (primarily because of issues relating to sample bias; see Doley, 2003) the presence of one or more of these copycat correlates in the arsonist profile is suggestive of the possibility that at the least a subgroup of firesetters might exist who demonstrate a heightened susceptibility to a copycat effect.

However, to delineate the concept of an individual at risk of arson copycat behaviour a key consideration is to sort out the “true” copycat arsons from the similar but “false” firesetting incidents (R. Surette, personal communication, September 13, 2003). Arson researchers would need to determine whether the criterion for copycat arson should be that without the media effect, no subsequent crime would occur (i.e., there would be no fire setting). Or, alternatively, would it be equally valid to include as copycat crimes those firesetting acts that are only modified as a result of exposure to media content? In the first scenario the media is seen as both a necessity and sufficient cause of the subsequent crimes, while in the later it is seen as a modifier only. The significance of this distinction for arson researchers is that there may be crucial differences in terms of the characteristics of persons doing the copying, in that one group might be inspired by the media to set a fire, while another group would be established arsonists who only draw inspiration for their firesetting techniques from the media.

### **Recommendations**

In the event that a copycat effect for arson exists, there are lessons to be learned from past efforts investigating copycat crimes. Arising mainly from the suicide contagion research a series of guidelines for journalists and editors reporting suicide stories have been developed (Gould, Wallenstein, & Davidson, 1989). Recommendations for the reporting of some crime-types, such as terrorism, have also been proposed although in a less comprehensive and more informal manner (e.g., Munday, 1994). Accordingly, should a copycat effect be found for arson it is not unreasonable to suggest that guidelines for the reporting of fire incidents be established. But herein lies a contentious issue. As highlighted by Stack (1994) efforts to minimise a contagion effect may easily be misunderstood. Advocating media guidelines for reporting opens a Pandora's Box of media ethical issues and censorship allegations (Hurst & White, 1994). Hassan (1995) acknowledges the delicacy of such negotiations in connection to the reporting of suicide when he writes

In a pluralistic democratic society, the media must report public interest stories and should not be subject to censorship; however, bearing in mind the possible impact of media reports on vulnerable people, a more careful and sensitive approach to reporting suicide may reduce this impact (p. 482).

Undeniably, it is important that before calls for changes to media reporting of fires carefully established scientific evidence is collected to support the notion of an arson copycat effect. Clearly, however, at this time there is simply insufficient evidence to determine with any degree of confidence whether or not a contagion effect operates for firesetting behaviour.

### **Future Directions for Arson Copycat Research**

The priority of research endeavours in this area should initially be to address the question of whether or not a contagion effect operates for arson. The answer will naturally determine the direction of subsequent research. In order to establish a sound scientific basis for further studies it is important that the methodological limitations of copycat research generally, and of arson research specifically, are addressed. But establishing the presence of imitative arson patterns is only a beginning. If a copycat effect for arson is found, clarifying how the contagion mechanism operates is vitally important because it is from this basis of knowledge that strategies for reducing the potential contagion effect may be developed. At that point the primary aim should be to determine how to reduce the impact of arson stories without infringing on the public's right to know and the importance of the media's role in serving the public's interest.

To this end future research efforts may be most usefully applied to considering the following issues with specific reference to arson:

- *Host and observer characteristics.* Suicidal contagion literature has suggested certain characteristics of the initial victim may influence subsequent suicide rates, possibly as a result of audience identification processes (e.g., Martin & Koo, 1997; Stack, 2000). Others have highlighted characteristics that may increase an individual's susceptibility to suicidal thinking (Martin, Clarke, & Pearce, 1993; Scheel & Westefeld, 1999). Future exploration of certain demographic and

psycho-social characteristics of both the initial perpetrator and the copycat offender may reveal links between host and observer variables.

- *Story characteristics.* Drawing from copycat literature as well as the body of advertising research a range of factors associated with media coverage has been suggested that may maximise or minimise a copycat effect (Phillips, et al., 1992; Stack, 2000). Specifically, future studies might consider the effect of amount of coverage, nature of the message, frequency, timing and length of the story, and placement of the message in the media on subsequent arson behaviour.
- *Media characteristics.* Although not conclusive, some reports have postulated different contagion effects for different types of media, such as print compared to television and film (Gould et al, 2003). Learning whether certain media types are more likely to influence subsequent firesetting behaviour is another important aspect for future consideration.
- *Effect of anti-arson stories.* It has been suggested that anti-suicide stories may reduce subsequent actual suicide behaviour (Martin & Koo, 1997), although other authors have disputed the claim (Ostroff, Behrends, Lee, & Oliphant, 1985). Considering the issue of arson contagion from this perspective may also be worthwhile.
- *Differences in contagion effects.* Some reports have found that stories about a particular method of suicide promote an increase in that type of actual suicidal behaviour but not necessarily in the overall suicide rate (Marzuk, Tardiff, & Leon, 1994; Versey, Kamanyire, & Volans, 1999). Anecdotally, copycat arsons seem to be associated more often with schools and churches. Previous researchers have suggested that arson may be classified as either instrumental or expressive depending on characteristics of the offence (Fritzon, 2001). It is conceivable, therefore, that a different copycat dynamic might exist between arson that is directed towards a more institutional target, such as a school or public office, compared to arson that is more personally driven, as in the case of revenge. Exploring the empirical evidence for different contagion effects for different types of arson may therefore prove to be a fruitful avenue of investigation.
- *Contagion period.* One of the methodological limitations in copycat research generally is the time period selected by researchers within which a contagion effect may be said to be operating. Differing opinions as to the likely period following an initial story in which actual subsequent behaviour might be categorised as “imitative” have been noted (Cantor et al., 1999; Stack, 1987). Future research may be directed toward establishing when the greatest impact for a likely contagion effect for arson stories might be.
- *Cross-cultural differences.* There is a dearth of cross-cultural studies in both copycat research and arson literature. Phillips et al. (1992) emphasises this aspect

and calls for more research to learn which media effects, if any, might be peculiar to a cultural group and which might be considered universal (p. 513).

### **Conclusion**

Anecdotally, at least according to the media, there is a copycat effect operating for arson. Difficulties in accessing suitable arson samples and in constructing appropriate and effective copycat research methodologies should not dissuade investigators from taking a closer look at the issue of copycat arson. The way forward for arson researchers is to utilise large data sets similar to those pursued in suicide contagion research as well as comparing copycat and non-copycat populations to determine if characteristics emerge that discriminate between the two. An advantage copycat arson researchers will have over suicide contagion studies is that the offenders should be available to answer questions about the impact of their media consumption on their firesetting behaviour, which hopefully will result in a more comprehensive account of the issue than might otherwise be possible. Copycat research finds there are a range of strategies designed to prevent contagion which do not necessarily involve the exclusion of all news coverage, but rather, which concentrate on modifying the specific aspects of media reporting that influence the imitation effect. Should a copycat effect be found for firesetting behaviour there appears to be some hope, therefore, that measured and well-considered steps could be taken to reduce the potential risk of copycat arsons.

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