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Copycat Crime and Copycat Criminals: Concepts and Research Questions

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Abstract

Copycat crime is a commonly acknowledged but under-researched social phenomenon. This work aims to encourage future research by further developing copycat crime theory and by offering a set of related research questions and testable hypotheses to prospective researchers. First, a set of 23 theoretical concepts culled from wide ranging disciplines and research that touch upon copycat crime and are helpful for conceptualizing copycat crime dynamics are discussed. Second, with its multi-disciplinary nature argued, copycat crime is forwarded as a unique crime phenomenon deserving of research attention under the rubric of three under-studied general research questions: “What are the characteristics of 1) criminogenic media, 2) copycat offenders, and 3) copycat settings? Lastly, associated with the three research questions a set of 44 specific copycat hypotheses are offered as unaddressed but testable propositions regarding copycat crime. It is hoped that a delineation of the current state of knowledge regarding copycat crime and specific research hypotheses that can be explored will spur the additional needed research required to understand the media-crime connection.

Infectious epidemics spread with the air or the wind; epidemics of crime follow the line of the telegraph (Gabriel Tarde).

INTRODUCTION

Originally rendered in Italian in the 1880s, the above statement by Gabriel Tarde is one of the earliest propositions regarding copycat crime. Subsequent criminological research on media and criminal behavior, however, did not directly address copycat crime but instead explored the more generic association between exposure to violent media content and aggression (Surette, 2015a). Copycat crime continues to be subsumed within broader theories of crime, most commonly social learning, and when mentioned is usually presented as a bizarre, high-profile subset of general crime. Compounding theoretical disinterest, the development of new media has resulted in content that is more interactive, pervasive, on-demand, and multi-authored so that contemporary media audiences are more likely than in the past to be exposed to copycat crime generating messages. Despite evidence of substantial copycat prevalenceⁱ and irrespective of recent developments in media technology, the specific relationship between media content and the generation of crime remains unspecified. Although advances have been made in the study of new media and behavior and the fact that copycat crime has begun to be recognized as a unique criminological phenomena (Helfgott, 2015; Surette 2015b),ⁱⁱ there has been limited theoretical discussion of copycat crime (Greer, 2009). As a result, an understanding of media imitative effects has lagged (Surette, 2015c). In response, this article reviews relevant theoretical concepts from communication, media, diffusion, imitation, and social learning research, discusses a set of derived general research questions in need of researchers, and offers a set of specific copycat crime hypotheses to encourage serious research on this phenomena.

Box 1

What constitutes a copycat crime?

For a crime to be a media generated copycat crime it must have been inspired by an earlier, media-publicized or portrayed crime—that is, there must be a pair of crimes linked through the media. The perpetrator of a copycat crime must have been exposed to the media portrait of the original crime and must have incorporated major elements of that crime into their crime. A copycat crime implies a crime dyad where at least two crimes, a generator and a copycat, are media yoked. A generator crime can be a real crime that is covered in the news or portrayed in infotainment or a fictional crime created in entertainment media, and generator crime content can be delivered by print, visual, audio, or new media channels. A wide range of behaviors have been forwarded as copycat crimes including large scale events such as riots (Bohstedt & Williams, 1988, Myers, 2000) and specific individual acts such as sniper and school shootings (Coleman, 2004); suicidesⁱⁱⁱ (Phillips, 1979, Phillips & Paight, 1987); and terrorism^{iv} (Nacos, 2007, Tuman, 2010, Weimann & Winn, 1994).

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS APPLICABLE TO COPYCAT CRIME

Although copycat crime has not been the subject of a large amount of criminological research, a surprising number of theoretical concepts have been developed in other disciplines that when combined with criminological ideas aid in studying the nuances and dynamics of copycat crime. Collectively they suggest three general copycat crime research questions. Chart 1 lists twenty-three concepts culled from the varied fields and identified as helpful for understanding copycat crime.

Chart 1 Copycat Crime Concepts

[Concepts from Sociology, Biology, and Psychology]

Imitation: The copying of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs from others. The concept of imitation has multiple roots in sociology, biology, and psychology. An element of imitation is a logical necessary component of a copycat crime.

Suggesto-imitative assaults: A term coined by Gabriel Tarde to describe crime in terms of imitative behavior. As part of a general theory of crime it depicts crime as socially learned behavior which propagates through society via both the media and interpersonal communication.

Mirror neurons: A hypothesized neurological sub-system by which sensory input— typically visual—drives analogous output in the muscular system. Mirror neurons appear to be special function neurons found in the brains of a number of species, humans included, that translate observed behavior into duplicate muscular motor behavior. They provide a biological basis for the commonality of imitation across species and a mechanism for copycat crime that does not require pathology or abnormal cognitive processing on the part of a copycat offender.

Role play: Related to child development, role play involves intentional imaginary role imitation which is felt to contribute to the development of an adult level theory-of-mind. Role play is important for copycat crime as a basis for generalized (as opposed to rote) imitation and the imitation of attitudes and beliefs as well as behaviors.

Theory of mind: The ability to accurately infer the state of mind and intentions of others. A theory of mind implies that a capacity to imitate underlies normal human socialization. For copycat crime, a theory of mind allows individuals to determine inferred goals from observing failed attempts (and thus goals that are not explicitly modeled) and the extraction of correctable errors from modeled failed crime by copycat offenders.

Collective Behavior: The behavior of people under the influence of a collective impulse in a onetime event such as a riot or sequential events such as a string of rebellions.

Fads and Fashions: These behaviors differ from one-time, one-event collective actions such as riots by involving large group sequential collective behavior occurring over a significant time period. Processes discovered in the study of fads and fashions shed light on the formation of crime waves and crime clusters.

[Concepts from Diffusion of Innovations]

Diffusion of innovations: The process in which innovations (new behaviors or techniques) are communicated and adopted over time among members of a social system.

Over-adoption: An adopted innovation that should be rejected either because it results in social harm or is harmful to the adopter. Tobacco use and crime are both examples. The issue for copycat crime is how and why a negative innovation such as crime is adopted and whether the adoption process mirrors that of socially positive innovations.

Relative advantage: The perceived advantage of the new innovative method or technique over continuing the use of an established prior method. As the primary characteristics that determines the adoption of innovations, new crime and crime techniques which are perceived as having relative advantages are seen as more powerful copycat generator crimes.

Communication channels: Channels can either involve face-to-face interactions or the mass media. Over the years, diffusion research has raised the role and importance of media communication channels and by extension their role in copycat crime waves.

Adoption decision: The decision to adopt an innovation involves the five steps potential adopters of an innovation undergo when deciding to adopt or not to adopt an innovation that they have been exposed to. A key for copycat crime is the implementation step which creates a copycat crime in the real world.

Cue-to-action: Sharing characteristics with the social-psychological concept of priming, an event that crystallizes a favorable attitude toward an innovation and can trigger implementation (copying). For copycat crime, established cues-to-action examples include violence or weapons imbedded in media content.

Innovativeness: Five types of adopters or copiers are detailed in the diffusion literature based on their level of the personality characteristic innovativeness, or their willingness to adopt new untested methods or behaviors. Extrapolating this research to copycat crime leads to the hypothesis that high levels of “criminal innovativeness” will be predictive of a propensity for copycat crime.

[Concepts from Social Learning]

Observational Social Learning: This research perspective combines classical conditioning, cognitive, and social processes into the study of how humans learn new behaviors in social settings. The main advance is the recognition of the unique cognitive abilities of humans that encourage imitation via symbolic interactions. Applied to copycat crime, maximum copycat crime effects will occur following multiple exposures to emotional content combined with copier opportunities for rehearsal.

Efficacy: The self-judgment of one's capability to perform a modeled behavior. For copycat crime, efficacy translates into the self-perception of one's ability to successfully commit a modeled generator crime.

[Concepts from Communication and Media Studies]

Social cognition: This concept refers to the cognitive processes that occur and are molded within social situations. Research has bridged psychology, sociology, and mass communication and examined how cognition is influenced by social interactions. For example, the mass communication social cognition model, "elaboration likelihood" examined the cognitive processing of mass media supplied information in decision making. Related to copycat crime it predicts that copying crime decision making will follow varied cognitive pathways depending upon the social dynamics and individual consumer needs and goals brought to exposure to a media generator crime.

Systematic decision making: A social cognition pathway where all relevant and available information is collected and assessed before making a decision. When cognitive motivation is high, systematic decision making is followed as long as the individual has the capability to understand the information gathered. This cognitive pathway is speculated as related to rational instrumental crimes.

Heuristic decision making: A social cognition pathway where decisions are based on incomplete information. This pathway is followed when cognitive motivation is low or the cognitive ability to process available information is not present. Heuristic copycat crime decision making is hypothesized to be more common and to be related to irrational emotional crimes.

Narrative Persuasion: This concept denotes the psychological involvement people experience when using the media as entertainment and escapism and captures the phenomenological experience of reading, hearing, or viewing a media work. In narrative persuasion, factual information is not the goal, being told an interesting story is and media information is simply absorbed, not assessed. Various terms such as transportation, engagement, or absorption have been used to describe this media impact.

Scripts: Pre-established behavioral directions held in memory that individuals can scroll up as needed. A script lays out the sequence of events that one believes are likely to happen and the behaviors that one believes are possible or appropriate for particular situations. A copycat crime script would be the behaviors and steps necessary to copy and implement a generator crime. Individuals acquire many more crime scripts than are activated. The acquisition of a crime script allows for the memory storage and later activation of the generator crime knowledge via both a conscious and a sub-conscious process.

Priming: The increased likelihood of particular thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors resulting from exposure to specific media content. Significant for copycat crime, when primed, the probability of someone imitating modeled content is increased. A basic hypothesized copycat crime model dynamic is that the more pro-crime primes an individual holds the more likely a copycat crime will occur. Priming also provides a psychological concept to further explain inexact imitation in which the imitated behavior is related to but not identical to the observed behavior and thereby offer an explanation for when copycat crimes do not mirror their generator crimes.

Exemplars: This concept describes a social event, usually newsworthy, which was portrayed in the media and came to be a publicly accepted example of a class of similar events. For example, a reported murder of a child becomes an exemplar of child murders for the public. How easily recalled and how influential exemplars are on an individual is related to how recently and frequently they had been activated. Exemplars are analogous to powerful primes for those who internalize them.

IMITATION

Understanding copycat crime starts with the concept of imitation and the sociological study of criminal imitation begins with Gabriel Tarde, the first criminologist to argue that crime was learned in the same manner as law abiding behavior.^v His work laid the foundation for later development in diffusion and social learning theory. For Tarde, copycat crime was explained by the concept of suggesto-imitative assaults which spread downward (from higher class to lower) and outward (from city to rural community). With imitation central in Tarde's conceptualization of society, it is not surprising he found copycat crime common: "*The criminal always imitates somebody, even when he originates; that is to say, when he uses in combination imitations obtained from various sources. He always needs to be encouraged by the example and approval of a group of men*" (Tarde, 1912, p. 278).^{vi} Tarde's work contained the seeds for other concepts important for copycat crime, and helped establish imitation as an important source of human behavior. However, Tarde's idea of imitative crime lay fallow in criminology for many years. It was in the disciplines of biology and psychology that the study of imitation initially advanced.

From the biological tradition and historically rooted in nineteenth century animal research (see for example Morgan, 1896), mirror neurons have emerged as the leading contemporary candidate concept for a neurological understanding of imitation. This research is important for copycat crime as it indicates that copying the behavior of others is both inherent

and common. It suggests that what needs explanation is not the copying of a crime by some but the lack of copying by most individuals (Decety & Chaminade, 2005, p. 213; Kinsbourne, 2005 p.163). Additionally important for copycat crime, a biologically based mirror neuron system also offers an explanation of the persistence of dysfunctional imitation, the imitation of behaviors that have negative consequences for the imitator, which would include many copycat crimes. For a biological mechanism such as imitation to be evolutionarily functional, all that is needed is that the majority of its consequences be beneficial (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001, pp. 52-53).^{vii} Thus, copycat crime may be dysfunctional for an individual but persist in the population because of the functional benefit of imitation for the social functioning of individuals overall. Mirror neurons therefore support the idea that we are hard wired for imitation and, subsequently, that copycat crime will be a more common crime phenomenon than first estimated (Surette, 2013).

In psychology, research on imitation has looked at developmental cognitive processes. In this perspective imitation is seen as a way of adapting to the environment and as crucial for normal personality development (see for example Piaget, 1928). From the developmental literature, a useful imitation concept for copycat crime is *role play* (Claxton 2005, p. 195). In role play, specific modeled behavior is not imitated but a type of “behavior set” is adopted. The child imitates by embellishing a prototype role model and produces behavior that is not necessarily what was observed. Instead, behavior based on how the imitated social role is believed to demand is produced. For example, children would behave differently toward an imaginary injured person depending upon whether they were playing the role of doctor, crime fighting hero, or criminal villain. Role play imitation works to duplicate in a copier’s mind the supposed mental states of others and suggests that the pre-copying media immersion reported for some violent copycat crime case studies is related to the childhood mental state assumed in role play (Meloy & Mohandie, 2001; Myers, Eggleston & Smoak, 2003).

Together biological and psychological research lead to the proposition that a capacity for imitation must exist for normal human development and the behavior of others must be understood cognitively for normal social functioning (Goldman, 2005). Regarding imitation, in order for individuals to be able to determine the appropriateness of when to imitate, they must be able to accurately infer the state of mind and intentions of others - to have a “theory of mind” regarding other humans (Hurley & Chater, 2005, p. 21; Meltzoff, 2005, p. 56). The concept of mirror neurons provides a biological basis for the imitation of media generated copycat crime with role playing and a theory-of-mind providing psychological processes that execute it. Collectively, this research on imitation provides a biological and psychological foundation for understanding copycat crime dynamics within individual copycat crime offenders. However, understanding the broader aggregate social processes involved in copycat crime required the return to concepts originally forwarded by Gabriel Tarde.

A first derivative from Tarde’s work on imitation that has relevance for copycat crime was an interest in *collective behaviors*, notably the behavior of crowds.^{viii} The study of collective behavior focused on the generation of mass imitation and what was often described as spontaneous copying generated by unique social dynamics operating upon large groups. A subsidiary set of research in this tradition looked at fads and fashions. This research focused on the long term development and stages associated with social trends and is important to copycat crime for introducing the mass media as a powerful behavioral force in society. The media came into play initially through Tarde’s idea of “publics” which were seen as a by-product of mass circulation newspapers.^{ix} The application of this research to copycat crime is twofold. One is

through the study of one-time large scale criminal events such as riots and lynchings. The other is through the study of waves of unique crimes such as airline hijackings or terrorist kidnappings that were seen to wax into and out of criminal fashion. Extrapolated to copycat crime, this research established that the perception of reality molded in social interactions significantly influences subsequent individual behavior of members of a crowd. This research also established the importance of mainstream media on social behavior and suggested that copycat crime will be a rational purposive learned act that is sometimes generated as a group outcome.

DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS

Also rooted in the work of Tarde, a host of useful copycat crime concepts have been developed within the study of the social diffusion of innovations. Focusing on the adoption of beneficial behaviors rather than criminal ones,^x studies of the social diffusion of innovations were found to be related to two pre-copycat decisions. First, there are decisions by media creators (producers, editors, authors, game designers) regarding media content. Criminogenic content must be created to be potentially copied. Second, potential copycat offenders must make decisions that allow themselves to be exposed to the criminogenic content (Rogers, 2003, p. 137). This can be a passive decision (they walk into a room with a television set turned on) or an active one (they purchase a video game and play it repeatedly). Once exposed, how valuable an innovation (or generator crime) is perceived to be is determined by five attributes of the innovation. Translating this body of largely non-crime research to copycat crime, these would be characteristics that the generator crime would possess that increased the likelihood of it being copied. It is important to note that the perceptions of the value of an innovation may differ from its actual value so that ineffective generator crimes might still be copied due to mistaken assignment of positive attributes by copycat offenders, an example of *over-adoption* as described by Rogers (2003, pp. 231-232). Of the innovation characteristics, *relative advantage* is the most pertinent for copycat crime.^{xi} While most likely weighed as a reduction in apprehension risk, a generator crime's relative advantage could also be a gain in social status so that less effective but more spectacular means of committing a crime will sometimes be seen as possessing a relative advantage. This appears to be particularly true for media oriented symbolic crimes (Surette, Hansen and Noble, 2009).

A second focus of diffusion research relevant for copycat crime looked at *communication channels*. As conceived communication channels distribute information on how to commit and justify crimes, and help copiers calculate their odds of detection and prosecution for criminal acts (Baker & Faulkner, 2003). Research on the diffusion of positive innovations indicated that mass media channels were usually more rapid and efficient but that interpersonal channels were more powerful in persuading copying decisions. If the diffusion of copycat crime is similar, media as a communication channel would increase knowledge of a generator crime while peer interaction would more determine adoption or copycat rates. It is also likely that where real-world peers are not available, new-media via blogs, chat rooms and smart phones can be effective substitutes for face-to-face communication (Rogers, 2003, p. 207 citing Valente & Saba, 1998).

Another concept found in the diffusion literature, the *innovation adoption decision*, is analogous to the decision to commit a copycat crime. In temporal order the associated decision to adopt steps would be gaining knowledge of the generator crime, being persuaded that copying

a crime is a good idea, deciding to copy the crime at some future point, implementing or actually attempting to copy a crime, and confirming and assessing the results of copying a crime. For copycat crime, all five steps can occur quite quickly (a viewer watches on the news a rioter in another part of the city ignite a car, decides this is a good idea, and ignites a nearby car within minutes) or over long time frames (a criminal spends years culling the media for information on con games before attempting one). In addition, persuasion to copy a crime may be enhanced by repeated media exposures – watching a film over and over for example. Also the fantasy and role playing afforded by the media in which an individual may mentally assume a criminal role and apply the innovative crime idea to their present or anticipated future situation should enhance adoption. An additional copycat crime applicable concept from the diffusion research is a *cue-to-action*. A cue-to-action could be as simple as a report of another successful copycat crime in the media encouraging potential but undecided copiers to act. Media demonstrations of successful crimes may also function as equivalent for copycat crime to the adoption trials described by Rogers (2003) in which an adopter pre-tests an innovation in a low risk, small scale trial before making a full commitment. Following the decision to copy, if an application opportunity becomes available a generator crime would be copied and depending upon the number of adopters a copycat crime wave would result (Sacco, 2005).

A final set of copycat crime applicable concepts derived from diffusion research involve the time spans associated with an individual's decision to copy. Discussing non-criminal behaviors, Rogers (2003) described five types of adopters based upon when they adopt an innovation and their level of the characteristic *innovativeness*. Extrapolating the diffusion research findings to copycat crime leads to the expectation that first wave copycats (innovators and early adopters in Rogers' terminology) will differ significantly from second and subsequent wave copycats (for Rogers, adopters described as "early majority" through "laggards"). As the launchers of a copycat wave, innovators and early adopters appear most relevant for understanding copycat crime as they are theoretically more attuned to generator crimes. Rogers (2003) argued that the media were more important for earlier adopters than for later adopters (first wave copycat crime over second and ensuing waves) because at the time these individuals copy a crime there would be few peers experienced with the new crime available for comparison and the likely consequences of copying would not be widely known.

The primary question regarding copycat crime from diffusion research is whether the diffusion of a negative social behavior such as crime mirrors the diffusion processes found for positive behaviors such as healthy lifestyles that have been more commonly studied in the diffusion research. For example, in that copycat criminals are likely to be disproportionately people on lower end of the social structure ("downs" in diffusion terminology), media criminogenic content aimed at low achievers, the poor, and the illiterate should be more influential, opposite what the diffusion research reports for positive innovations (cf. Rogers, 2003). For the diffusion of negative innovations such as crime Bandura (2001, p. 290) ascribes the characteristics of "gullibility" to explain early adopters and "astuteness" for resisters. Hence, while much media crime content would seem to encourage crime copying by showing crime as rewarded, interpersonal communications with non-criminal role models could work against copycat crime adoption by reminding potential copycats of real-world negative consequences. In contrast, interpersonal communications increase adoption of positive innovations. However, Rogers (2003) argued that taboo innovations likely diffuse differently because individuals would not discuss them freely, thereby decreasing the influence of interpersonal networks. Therefore in

the diffusion literature, media content is forwarded as a powerful source of behavior models for socially isolated individuals and is hypothesized to be particularly impactful on criminally inclined loners.

OBSERVATIONAL SOCIAL LEARNING

While diffusion research focused on the spread of new knowledge in a society and provided a solid foundation for studying crime waves, it did not explore how behavior was socially learned from the diffused knowledge. It was social learning theorists who looked at how imitation functioned within a social environment and what was required for an individual to learn a new criminal behavior. Tied to classical and operant conditioning theory, social learning promoted observational learning from crime models as crucial for criminality.^{xii} While early social learning theorists emphasized real-world models, later ones saw the media as out-stripping reality as crime model sources (Bandura, 1973). In the social learning perspective, a copier's behavior is influenced by observing a model, but it is not necessary to observe a crime model being rewarded for criminal behavior for imitation to follow. It is the expectation of eventual reinforcement on the part of the copier that is essential for the copying of the modeled crime. Therefore, when a criminal model reflects past rewards more than punishments for crime the copying of the model increases (Bandura, 1973). Thus, even if crime was not directly portrayed as rewarded, criminal models that "looked" like they had been rewarded in the past for crime via lavish life-styles should increase imitation of their portrayed crime (Bandura & Walters, 1963).

Regarding the copycat offender, the most important copier characteristic in social learning theory is their self-efficacy or their belief in their criminal abilities. (Bandura, 1995; Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). High self-efficacy belief regarding crime leads to an increased motivation to copy a crime by raising an individual's criminal goals, the effort they are willing to expend on crime attempts, their perseverance in the face of obstacles, and their resilience to failures (Bandura & Walters, 1963). On the other hand, low self-efficacy regarding difficult law abiding tasks such as the ability to gain or hold a job, translates into more simple copycat crimes by individuals who shy away from difficult tasks. For copycat crime the existence of prior offense records is herein hypothesized to be associated with higher perceptions of criminal self-efficacy. Prior arrests that did not deter should add to an offender's self-assessment of their ability to copy and commit modeled crimes. Criminal history thus plays a role in varied ways in copycat crime. First, a criminal history comes into play via the creation of a Skinnerian history of rewards and punishments for past crime and for the future copying of the criminal behavior of others (Bandura, 1995). A criminal history also indicates prior knowledge of crime and a likely enhanced interest in media crime content in addition to a commitment to future crime. Whether a criminal history increases the likelihood of copycat crime for any particular individual is determined by the dual role that punishment played in that history in the potential copier's real world and their media world of crime (Fisch, 2002).

Punishment is argued to be related to copycat crime in three ways. First, the punishment levied on the media criminal model (the punishment observed in the media content) is important. Second, the estimation of the likelihood of punishment that a potential copycat copier extracts (the punishment the copier expects) is more important. And third, the punishment that is administered to the copier (the experienced punishment) is ultimately most important. In the

generation of copycat crime, punishment in the first sense may not reduce the copying of a crime because the estimation of punishment in the second sense may not be simultaneously reduced. This can be true even when punishment in the third sense ultimately occurs. The crucial issue involves the ability of the portrayal of punishment to deter copying. Working against deterrence, punishment portrayed in some ways is an ineffective, even counterproductive, deterrent (Bandura, 1973). For example, a media message common to some music-video plot lines portray the police negatively and as social oppressors and consumers may side with and emulate punished criminal models when they are portrayed heroically (Brown & Cody, 1991; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). This leads to the second consideration of media portrayed punishment, its effect on the expectation of punishment from copying a modeled crime. As it is the expectation of results that most strongly determine initial copying, the effect of the observation of media portrayed punishment on the expectation of real-world punishment is more important than the level of punishment observed in the media for copycat crime.^{xiii} When actions are guided by anticipated consequences that are not accurate predictors of reinforcement, for example when punishment is seen as unlikely when in reality it is probable, imitation will be weakly controlled by its actual consequences until cumulative experiences produce more realistic expectations (Bandura, 1973). That is, until punitive results erase the faulty expectation of positive ones, copying will continue.

Concerning actual experienced punishment, if individuals have learned that imitation is rewarding, the degree to which observers have been previously rewarded or punished for compliant versus criminal behavior influences the extent to which criminogenic imitation will occur and persist (Bandura & Walters, 1963). As copycat crime can be both rewarding (fame, glory, publicity) or punishing (failure, capture, prison, death) the perception of the ratio of rewards to punishments influences an individual's copycat crime propensity. Applying Skinnerian conditioning tenets, inconsistent patterns of punishment and rewards or random reward patterns for copying crimes generate copycat crime behavior that will be difficult to eliminate. As Bandura (1973, p. 224) stated: "children who learned that the benefits of crime are obtained at the risk of some negative outcomes are not easily discouraged by non-reward or censure". Sporadic punishment or frequent neutral results for committing crime will not counteract the copy sustaining effects of periodic random but substantial rewards. In addition, social incentives or external reinforcements to continue copying can be either material rewards such as money or intangible rewards such as social praise or enhanced status in a juvenile gang (Bandura, 1973; Rosekrans & Hartup, 1967). Furthermore, after new skills have become entrenched through reinforcement, they can become habitual even if they are no longer rewarded (Bandura & Walters, 1963). Skinnerian conditioning theory predicts that rewards can be inconsistent and consequences can even be randomly punitive without eliminating a copying response. In addition, media depicted punishments can be interpreted as informative lessons on how to avoid the modeled mistakes that triggered punishment in the media content when copying that content. Copycat offenders may subsequently act on the belief that with slight modification of tactics they can gain the benefits of the crime in the real world without suffering the costs portrayed in the media world. In gist, affixing a punishment to the end of a succession of successful crimes or to near successful ones should not be expected to remove criminogenic learning effects due to offenders committing the error of overestimating their odds of success and confidence that they have reduced their risk of arrest by altering their crime techniques (Bandura,

1973, p. 271, citing Claster, 1967). A result expected to coincide with high crime self-efficacy beliefs.

COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES

Mass communication theorists have also conceptually contributed to understanding the imitation of media portrayed crime. The first applicable concept is *social cognition*, as derived from the study of how people socially process media supplied information. For copycat crime, social cognition is important for understanding how criminogenic knowledge is socially processed and the media's role in social cognition has increased as the media have become a pervasive source of social information. Research in the media's role in social cognition led to two individual level decision pathways, systematic and heuristic, that are relevant for copycat crime. The systematic path is related to thoughtful, planned, instrumental copycat crimes (here are detailed instructions on how to successfully commit this crime). The mimicked bank robbery detailed in the film *Set It Off* is an example of copycat offenders following a systematic central processing path to a copycat crime.^{xiv} Conversely, the heuristic path involves less rational, more spontaneous, emotional copycat crimes (they are rioting on television and no one's getting arrested! It looks exciting! Let's do the same here). Unplanned opportunity assaults or rapes and some hate-crime clusters would be examples.^{xv}

The two social cognitive paths, however, are not felt to adequately encompass the full cognitive dynamics of copycat crime. An additional alternative copycat crime media pathway is found within the concept of *narrative persuasion* which captures the phenomenological experience of reading, hearing, or viewing a dramatic media product. The concept of narrative persuasion is derived from entertainment-education research on the utility of using entertainment styled media to invoke social change^{xvi} and the variously termed descriptors "transportation," "engagement," or "absorption" have been used to characterize this type of media impact (cf. Singhal & Rogers, 1999). In this path, media information is simply absorbed, not assessed, and an understanding of the deep psychological involvement with media supplied narratives that sometimes develops in consumers is suggested. This pathway to copycat crime is felt to be more likely followed if there is interest in the narrative genre (i.e., the consumer enjoys crime stories) and if the content is well-crafted or has realistic special effects (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Additionally relevant for copycat crime, narrative persuasion offers an explanation of media influence on initially unsympathetic consumers through the use of empathetic transitional characters. Transitional characters initially espouse contrary beliefs within content that models the process of attitude and behavior change for the consumer (Green, Garst, Brock and Chung, 2006; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Thus, an individual initially unlikely to copy a particular crime would be persuaded to do so by observing an empathetic model who is shown as also initially unwilling to commit the crime but eventually undergoing a transformation shown in the narrative in which the crime comes to be seen in a positive light (Polichak & Gerrig, 2002).

Another mass communication concept related to social cognition, *scripts* (or memorized sets of behavior steps), further contributes to understanding copycat crime. Huesmann (1986) offered two time modes by which media create new crime scripts in individuals. One is via a short-term activating process in which media content cues the retrieval of already-learned behavior scripts. It is hypothesized that most copycat crime is a short-term retrieval process

carried out by established offenders presented with a crime opportunity. The second process involves media creation of new scripts, a long-term acquisition process that combines the consumption of criminogenic media and exposure to real world criminal models and involves the sub-processes of modeling, skills acquisition, rehearsal, and performance (Bandura, 1973). Thus, the concept of scripts applies to both the acquisition of new criminal behavior and the performance of older stored criminal behaviors. Huesmann (1986) suggested a reciprocal process in which crime and criminogenic media viewing perpetuated themselves—criminogenic scripts stimulated criminal fantasies and mental rehearsal which, in turn, increase script recall and retrieval. If crime was reinforced when displayed, it could become habitual and more likely to be retrieved in more situations in the future, which in turn would encourage both more crime and more criminogenic media use (Huesmann 1986).

Priming and *exemplars* are two final concepts from communication research that are relevant for copycat crime. Related to script activation, they involve the impact of specific elements of media content on the psychological state of media consumers and their assessment of the world. Extrapolating research on primes and exemplars to copycat crime, exposure to crime and criminal justice media content should equal more criminogenic imitation by individuals. Priming is applied to copycat crime as a source of ideas and beliefs that construct a particular social reality—the perception that the nature of the world is such that a particular type of crime is appropriate, justified, and likely to be successful. The related mass communication concept of exemplars describes powerful media supplied examples of social phenomena (Petty, Priester, and Brinol, 2002). Applied to copycat crime, the most powerful exemplar generator crimes would be recent emotional, visual crimes whose content was unchallenged by other contradictory exemplars. Thus, showing successful looters without showing arrested ones should, not surprisingly, increase the number of copier looters. Once primed, an individual is more likely to copy a media modeled crime particularly if being primed cues up pre-established criminal scripts. It is speculated that priming therefore works as a short time-frame mechanism that encourages the acting out of pre-existing criminal behaviors and that social learning works as a long-term behavior modifying process that results in acquiring criminal scripts at the individual level.

To summarize the implications of the twenty-three concepts listed in Chart 1 for copycat crime, the requirements set out in the research for behavioral instruction are met by the media's crime-related content and, at least theoretically, the transfer of generator crime knowledge to copycat crime offenders should be common. The imitative impact of media depends upon the nature of the content, the manner in which individuals' process the media supplied information, and the social context at-risk copycat offenders find themselves. Copycat crime is forwarded as not simply a subset of general crime but as occupying a realm that involves concepts ranging from the individual level bio-neurological level to the broad-scale cultural level. As such, copycat crime should be considered as a unique crime process with a set of unique research questions.

COPYCAT CRIME RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Collectively the concepts culled from the diffusion, social learning, communication, and media violence research suggest characteristics for copycat offenders and circumstances surrounding

copycat crime and lead to three umbrella copycat crime research questions. Listed in Chart 2, forty-four specific copycat crime hypotheses are subsumed under the three research questions. The hypotheses are related to the expected characteristics of criminogenic media, copycat offenders, and copycat settings. Each hypothesis is offered as a testable inquiry that can be empirically explored individually or as part of a research effort that broadly addresses one of the three overarching research areas.

Chart 2
Copycat Crime Hypotheses

Research Question 1: Characteristics of Criminogenic Media

(Generator Crime Content)

1. Generator crimes that are low skill, successful, and innovative are most likely to generate copycat crimes.
2. Media crimes shown as successful will be the most criminogenic.
3. Media content that portrays successful crimes followed by a final punishment should generate the second highest copycat crime rate.
4. Media content that depicts only unsuccessful crimes should generate the least number of copycat crimes.
5. Media content that contains more criminogenic models will generate more copycat crime than similar content with fewer models.
6. Media portrayed crimes that evoke strong emotions will generate more copycat crime than non-emotional generating crimes.
7. Emotion-laden media portrayed crimes will cause potential copycat criminals to overestimate the number of people committing similar crimes and increase the acceptability of copying the crime.
8. Emotion-laden media portrayed crimes will increase potential copycat offender's overestimating the real-world success of copying the crimes.
9. Media crimes portrayed visually will produce more copycat crime than non-visual media portrayed crimes.
10. Media content that provides details instructions within clear, explicit visual content will increase copycat crime rates.
11. A positive interaction effect between content that improves the mood of a media consumer and their belief that positive consequences will occur from imitation will increase copycat crime.

(Media Crime Models)

12. Criminal models portrayed as heroic, competent, attractive, admired, high status, and instructive and with positive motives for committing a crime will generate more copycats.
13. Consumer identification with criminal models (similarity in age, gender, and race) will increase copycat crime.
14. Media criminal models who foster a pseudo-social relationship with consumers will result in individuals seeking crime instructions from media criminogenic “friends” and more copycat crime.
15. Media crime models that serve as electronic “change agents” will increase copycat crime.

(Non-Generator Crime Content)

16. General media crime content that contains stories that are more engaging and heavily involve the consumer in their narratives will heighten copying.
17. General media crime content that neutralizes the negative effects of crime by reducing individual responsibility and distress for crime, reduces the perception of crime harm, condones crime, or shows crime as righteous will increase copying.
18. General crime content that portrays crime as appropriate and likely to be successful in multiple social settings will generate more copycats.
19. General crime content that is more realistic, has more action, and is more exciting will generate more copycats.
20. General crime content that persuades individuals that they possess the capabilities to commit crime will generate more copycats.

Research Question 2: Characteristics of Copycat Offenders

21. The most important copycat crime personality trait is a high criminal self-efficacy belief.
22. Pre-established offenders with “risk-of-arrest” concerns will cull the media for innovative risk reduction crime techniques and adopt new criminal behaviors.
23. Individuals with low self-esteem, low self-control, disinhibition, sensation seeking, a history of reward for imitation, and high dependency (seek help on easy tasks) will more likely be copycats.
24. High intelligence increases the acquisition of criminogenic knowledge by helping the reception processes (learning the crime steps).
25. Low intelligence increases decisions to implement or copy criminal behavior by helping the yielding processes (agreeing that committing a crime is a good idea).
26. Copier characteristics associated with criminogenic innovations will be significantly different from those found for adopters of socially positive innovations.
27. Individuals who are less educated, less literate, lower social status, less socially mobile, less empathetic, and less dogmatic are more likely to copycat.
28. Isolation first offenders who are dependent upon the media for information about the world are more likely to copycat.

29. Individuals who enjoy seeing laws broken and authority defied are more likely to copycat.
30. Delusional individuals with high interest in guns and law enforcement, intense repeated media exposure to violent media generator crimes, and social situations defined by idleness, seclusion, resentment and perceptions of persecution are more likely to copycat criminal violence.
31. Individuals who become more immersed in criminogenic media and fixated on criminogenic content are more likely to copycat.
32. Individuals who prefer media crime content that is more narratively persuasive (more transporting, absorbing, or engaging) are more likely to copycat.
33. Individuals who imagine themselves as the criminals (who mentally substitute themselves for the media model) are more likely to copycat.

Research Question 3: Characteristics of Copycat Settings.

34. The setting in which interactions between consumers and media content occurs will explain copycat crime rates more than individual attributes or media content characteristics.
35. Family and neighborhood settings determine copycat crime levels more than cultural settings as they determine the potential copycat's estimation of the likelihood of reward versus punishment.
36. Early exposure to law-abiding models will be a copycat crime insulator.
37. Observing criminal successes in both media content and real world settings will reduce the inhibitory power of media portrayed punishment.
38. In high-crime, low-punishment communities the perception of the rewards for crime, estimations of the probability of being caught, and expectations of mild punishments if caught will increase copycat crime levels.
39. At the neighborhood setting level, increased social disorganization will increase the copycat effect of criminogenic media content and the copycat crime rate by providing more opportunities to implement copycat crimes.
40. A pervasive crime culture, a history of high societal crime levels, and a crime saturated media will increase copycat crime levels.
41. Where a crime saturated popular culture has substituted for a law abiding local peer culture in a society, copycat crime rates will be higher.
42. Copycat effects will be higher in societies with high-crime urban areas and will support a copycat diffusion process from large to small communities.
43. Societies with criminal justice systems that are viewed as oppressive or illegitimate will experience higher copycat crime rates.
44. Societies with inconsistent patterns of punishment and rewards, especially where crime is randomly rewarded, will have higher copycat crime rates and copycat offenders who are hard to dissuade.

RESEARCH QUESTION ONE: WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CRIMINOGENIC MEDIA?

This research question reflects the need to delineate the aspects of media content that are likely to generate copycat crime. Looking at the media generator crime characteristics suggested by the theoretical concepts discussed (hypotheses 1-11), a first hypothesis is that portrayed crimes that are low skill, successful, and considered innovative are most likely to be generator crimes (Akers, 1998). In addition, in that imitators mix and match behaviors from multiple models, content with more criminogenic models should result in more copycat crime than content with few criminal models (Bandura, 1973). The portrayed success of a modeled crime is speculated as crucial. Following the logic suggested in the prior discussion of concepts leads to three empirical propositions regarding media content and copycat crime generation: 1) media content that shows crime as successful should be the most criminogenic; 2) content that contains successful crimes followed by a final punishment should generate the second highest copycat crime rate; and 3) content that depicts only unsuccessful crimes should generate the least number of copycat crimes.

Delving into mass media research, from exemplification theory the concept of exemplars predicts that crime content that evokes strong emotions should increase copycat crime responses and visual content should trump printed content (Zillmann, 2002). Exemplification theory also predicts that emotional generator crimes will cause potential copycat criminals to overestimate the number of people committing similar crimes, thereby increasing the generator crime's social acceptability as well as increasing the likelihood of potential copycat offender's over-estimating their success from copying (Zillman, 2002). Along these lines, an interaction effect is hypothesized with content that improves the mood of the consumer raising the belief that positive consequences from imitation are more likely (Petty, Priester, and Brinol, 2002). Also regarding media portraits of generator crimes, content that provides details instructions within clear, explicit visual content should increase copycat crime (Akers, 1998; Fisch, 2002).

The second criminogenic media research area concerns the characteristics of the media criminal models (hypotheses 12-15). Criminal models who are portrayed as heroic, attractive, admired, with high status and high prestige, with positive motives to commit a crime (breaking the law to protect the weak for example) and who are shown as competent and instructive are hypothesized to be more readily imitated (Bandura, 1995; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Wilson, Colvin, and Smith, 2002). These characteristics are expected to interact with consumer identification with criminal models (similarity in age, gender, and race) and with criminal self-efficacy assessments (Bandura, 1995; Wilson, Colvin & Smith, 2002). Similarly, media personalities who foster an illusionary pseudo-social relationship with viewers are hypothesized to result in more individuals seeking crime instruction from their media criminogenic "friends" (Rubin, 2002, pp. 540-541, citing Horton & Wohl, 1956). An unresolved diffusion research generated hypothesis related to copycat crime is whether media provided models can serve as electronic "change agents" similar to the real world ones described by Rogers (2003, p. 6). Related to copycat crime, the research issue is whether pre-established offenders with "risk-of-arrest" problems cull the media for innovative risk reduction crime techniques, and are they encouraged by media portrayed criminogenic change-agents, such as popular song artists, to adopt new criminal behaviors?

Lastly, a number of criminogenic content characteristics beyond those associated with specific generator crimes have been hypothesized as contributors to copycat crime (hypotheses 16-20). Content that contains stories that are more engaging and heavily involve the consumer in their narratives should heighten copying. Neutralization content that either reduces individual responsibility and distress for crime, that reduces the perception of harm from crime, or that condones crime and shows it as righteous should also increase copying (Akers, 1998; Bandura, 1973, pp. 203, 216, 231, citing Rosekrans & Hartup, 1967). Other non-generator crime related aspects of content that increase imitative effects include more generalizable content (this behavior is appropriate and likely to be successful in multiple social settings); content that is generally more realistic, has more action, and is more exciting (Akers, 1998; Bandura, 1973; Haridakis, 2002); and content that persuades individuals that they possess the capabilities to commit crime (Bandura, 1995). Finally, the overall amount of crime content is a hypothesized factor. The copycat crime rate is speculated to increase with increased news coverage of generator crimes and with entertainment media that is crime saturated (Akers, 1998).

The speculation is that the most criminogenic content is that which reinforces criminality, contains numerous criminal role models, and teaches that crime is permissible, justified, explicitly rewarded, and frequently unpunished. The most important modeled crime characteristics are related to the portrayed consequences to the media crime models that lead to positive expectations on the part of copiers from committing the portrayed crimes (Bandura & Walters, 1963).

RESEARCH QUESTION TWO: WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF COPYCAT OFFENDERS?

This research question involves the traits that are speculated to be associated with copycat criminals (hypotheses 21-33). The single personality trait that is hypothesized as most important is a high criminal self-efficacy belief (Bandura, 1995). A successful criminal history is forwarded as a surrogate measure of this trait as it reflects the degree to which observers have been previously rewarded or punished for criminal behavior and thereby their belief in their criminal self-efficacy (Bandura & Walters, 1963, Rogers, 2003). It is hypothesized that established confident offenders who see copying media modeled crimes as good means of attaining materials or social goals will copy a crime if presented with an opportunity (Rogers, 2003).

In addition to criminal efficacy, a number of other traits including low self-esteem, low self-control, disinhibition, sensation seeking, a history of reward for imitation, and high dependency (seeks help on easy tasks) have also been hypothesized to increase one's general willingness to imitate (Akers, 1998; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Haridakis, 2002). Regarding intelligence levels the message is mixed. Elaboration likelihood theory posits that high intelligence helps reception processes (learning the crime steps) and that low intelligence helps yielding processes (agreeing that committing the crime is a good idea) (Petty, Priester, and Brinol, 2002). Therefore, both high and low intelligence are speculated to increase copying crime by individuals. High intelligence is speculated to increase the acquisition of criminogenic knowledge, lower intelligence is hypothesized to increase decisions to implement or copy the criminal behavior.

Diffusion research provides another set of possible copycat characteristics. Regarding socially positive innovations, early adopters were found to be more educated, more literate, had higher social status and greater upward social mobility, were more empathic, favorably viewed change, coped better with uncertainty and risk, and perceived themselves as in control. Regarding negative innovations such as crime, the relevant question is: Are copycat criminals similar or opposite to early adopters of socially positive innovations? Personality traits related to adopting positive innovations are hypothesized to be reversed for criminal innovators. For example, those with lower social status may criminally innovate earlier rather than later. It is equally logical for a copycat criminal to be less educated, less literate, have lower social status and less upward social mobility or aspirations and to have a less empathetic, dogmatic, or rational personality. They may also resist change, not deal well with uncertainty or risk and see themselves as less in control (cf. Rogers, 2003). Based on the nature and social approbation associated with most crime, the prediction at this point is that copier characteristics associated with criminogenic innovations will be significantly different from those found in adopters of socially positive innovations.

Another argued copycat offender trait is being an isolated media consumer. First off, an isolated consumer is more dependent on the media for information about the world (Akers, 1998). Second, with deviant behavior an individual is more likely to be secretive, and social isolation further decreases the likelihood that a potential copier will be exposed to negative assessments of their criminal plans (Akers, 1998; Rogers, 2003). Thus, the more individuals see media as substitutes for primary social groups and rely more on media based social networks and less on real world interpersonal networks, the more likely they are expected to show copycat effects (Akers, 1998; Rogers, 2003). Similarly, an enhanced copying effect is expected for offenders weakly networked into law-abiding groups and strongly networked into deviant groups (Akers, 1998; Rogers, 2003). Concerning the perceived usefulness of media criminogenic information, “uses and gratifications” communication theory predicts that offenders and persons already committed to a crime will be more attuned to copycat effects (Rubin, 2002). Therefore an enjoyment in seeing laws broken or those in authority defied should increase an individual’s likelihood to copy a crime (Bryant & Miron, 2002). Copycat crime should also be more attractive to individuals who do not see law abiding as likely to be rewarded (Akers, 1998) and who have few law-abiding alternatives as they should be slow to abandon criminality even though it results in occasional punishments (Bandura, 1973).

Regarding extreme copycat criminal violence, delusional personalities with histories of high interest in guns and law enforcement encounters, intense repeated media exposures, and deterioration in socioeconomic functions resulting in idleness, seclusion, resentment, and perceptions of persecution have been implicated (Bandura, 1973). These factors combined with media immersion have been hypothesized as predictive of violent copycat criminals, particularly for males who also score high on psychoticism (Sparks & Sparks, 2002, p. 281, quoting Zillmann & Weaver, 1997).

A final area of hypothesized copycat offender characteristics relates to how individuals interact with media. Media emersion and fixation on criminogenic content (which are conceptually different from the number of hours of media consumption) have been cited as copycat crime precedents (Mundorf & Laird, 2002; Rogers, 2003). This fixated emersion is speculated to be linked to a narrative persuasion effect. The more transported, absorbed, or engaged consumers are with criminogenic content the more likely they are to copy the content.

Lastly, individuals who imagine themselves as the criminals (who mentally substitute themselves for the media model) are hypothesized as more likely to copy (Mazur, 2002, p. 297, citing Dowrick & Raeburn, 1995).

In sum, the most likely individual to be a copycat offender is hypothesized to be a socially isolated but criminally confident offender who has immersed themselves in criminogenic media and who hold a set of attitudes that support the committing of crime.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SETTINGS WHICH INCREASE COPYCAT CRIME?

It is first hypothesized that the setting in which the interaction between consumer and media content occurs will explain more copycat crime rate variance across communities than individual attributes or characteristics of the media content (Bandura, 1973; McPhail, 1991). It is felt that culture, local environment, access to weapons, and other setting characteristics in which a potential imitator sits after exposure to a behavioral model which determine copying more than individual copier characteristics.^{xvii} For example, many video game players will learn SWAT term tactics without ever applying them due to social and cultural inhibitors in their settings. In that “predisposing conditions” will be more important than “predisposed individuals” (Bandura, 1973), the premise is that the prevalence of copycat crime is determined at the social structural level and some cultures, social structures, and community environments increase the capability of media to generate crime more than others (Akers, 1998).

The most important settings are speculated to be found at the family and neighborhood levels (hypotheses 35-39) as they determine the potential copycat’s estimation of the likelihood of reward versus punishment for copying (Akers, 1998, p.53; Bandura, 1973). At the family setting level, family dynamic research suggests that criminal parents should produce more copycat offspring (Mazur, 2002; Bandura & Walters, 1963). Criminal parents, even when they preach law-abiding behavior and punish law-breaking acts, provide powerful criminogenic models and enhance the reality of observed media ones. Conversely, insulators of media criminogenic effects include early exposure (priority in social learning terms) to law-abiding models. On the other hand, observed criminal successes in both media content and neighborhoods should weaken the inhibitory power of media portrayed punishment (Bandura, 1973). Thus, in high-crime, low-punishment communities the perception of the rewards for crime, estimations of the probability of being caught, and perceptions of low punishment severity if caught should increase copycat crime. Lastly, at the neighborhood setting level, increased social disorganization should increase the criminogenic effect of media content and the copycat crime rate by providing more copycat implementation opportunities.

Beyond the family and neighborhood, the culture where these settings reside is also hypothesized as an important copycat crime factor. A pervasive crime culture, a history of high societal crime levels, and crime saturated media, especially content that primes criminal scripts, all should increase copycats (Akers, 1998). To the extent that a crime saturated popular culture has substituted for a law abiding local peer culture in a society, media linked copycat crime should be further encouraged (Akers, 1998). These effects should be heightened in societies with high-crime urban areas that would support the diffusion process of innovative crime techniques from large to smaller communities and thereafter to rural areas as first described by

Gabriel Tarde in the nineteenth century (Fisher, 1980). Lastly, the expected decrease in copycat crime from media content showing the punishment of crime may be derailed in real-world settings with haphazard and intermittent punishment or when punishment increases social status. Additionally, societies with criminal justice systems that are viewed as oppressive or illegitimate should further exacerbate the ineffectiveness of punishment and increase the acceptability of copycat crime.

In gist, societies with inconsistent patterns of punishment and rewards, especially where crime is randomly rewarded are hypothesized to generate copycat offenders who are the hardest to dissuade as they will not expect a reward for each crime but will anticipate that the next crime will produce one (Bandura, 1973). Settings replete with real and media crime models and with the cultural values, structure and history to support and encourage crime are hypothesized to generate the highest copycat crime rates.

DISCUSSION

From these three research questions and their associated hypotheses a candidate copycat crime profile can be posed. Pending research verification, at-risk copycat offenders are hypothesized to be individuals who prefer crime content, see that content as instructional, and who immerse themselves in criminogenic media. Although the rank order of the personality traits is not known, speculation is that criminal efficacy belief is related to the highest copycat risk. Living in a family, neighborhood, and culture that encourages and justifies crime and provides ample opportunities to commit crime will further maximize copycat behavior. Hypothesized individual level copycat flags therefore include offense histories, pro-crime attitudes, and criminal environments. The highest copycat crime rates should be generated where criminogenic media models abound and where crime has local social value (cf. Bandura, 1973). Matching this hypothesized profile on a number of points, many young adult offenders in the United States are thought to be especially at-risk for media generated copycat crime influences.

An important emerging copycat crime research question concerns new media. New media, which include the ubiquitous personal, on-demand, multi-media communication and gaming devices, are qualitatively different from older media forms. New media are more interactive and allow consumers to control the delivery and often the content of the media they consume. With new media, the user moves from passive consumer to active co-producer of content (Surette, 2015d). Thus, generator copycat crimes can be co-authored by at-risk consumers and tailored to meet specific idiosyncratic needs and thereby hypothetically ease the acquisition of crime scripts and heighten the likelihood of crime implementation. In addition, the theories discussed herein, including the media and communication based ones, conceptualized human interactions as largely conducted through primary groups and as face-to-face encounters with family and friends. New media, however, has created a new conception of primary groups that eliminates the need for face-to-face encounters. While the media play a role in most of the theories associated with the discussed concepts, they were not central elements for imitation and modeling, social learning, diffusion, or collective behavior theory. These theories argue that face-to-face encounters and watching live models are more significant than exposure to media in generating the copying of behavior. Only for some aspects of priming, for a small number of criminologists, and the mass communication theorists did the media play central roles. The

nature of new media, however, brings that omission into question. New media provides a copycat pathway that combines the power of face-to-face encouragement with the anonymity often necessary to seek instructions for carrying out illegal acts.

The research question is how new media will interact with copycat crime? This is not a trivial question as past shifts in media forms have harbingered substantial shifts in social dynamics (Meyrowitz, 1985) and crime and justice (Surette, 2015b). One prediction is that the narrative persuasion impact of criminogenic media will be increased when delivered via new media as narrative media products and new media technologies share the goal of enhanced, more engaging, and more life-like mediated consumer experiences (Biocca, 2002). Increased media interactivity and higher virtual reality capabilities should also lead to higher levels of user immersion in media and subsequently higher associated copycat crime levels among at-risk new media consumers (Mundorf & Laird, 2002; Surette 2015d). The interaction between new media and the wider distribution of crime instructions to motivated individuals is offered as the most pressing research question concerning copycat crime.

In closing, a number of copycat crime hypotheses have been posed and await research validation or rejection. Copycat crime needs to be studied and understood as both an individual act and an aggregate level crime phenomenon. At the individual level, primed imitation emerges as the hypothesized short-term copycat crime mechanism, script acquisition as the most likely long-term mechanism. At the socially aggregated level, diffusion and social learning processes are thought to overlay social factors conducive to copycat crime which determine copycat crime rates. Most of what is thought to be known about copycat crime, however, is speculation based upon research on, at best crime in general, and at worst, non-criminal behavior (Surette, 2015c). A host of copycat crime research questions await serious research.

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ⁱ Prior research in a number of fields suggested that copycat crime is as a persistent crime phenomenon (Helfgott, 2015). Researchers have mostly relied on anecdotal reports to gauge the extent and nature of copycat crime and the compiled incidents indicated that criminal events that were rare in real life were sometimes committed soon after similar events were depicted in the media. Copycat effects appear to be especially strong following a well-publicized successful act using a novel approach. In addition to anecdotal reports, offender surveys have suggested that copycat crime influences a substantial proportion of about one in four offenders (Surette, 2013).

ⁱⁱ Copycat crime has been described as a subtype of a broader class of technology related crimes that emerged in the late twentieth century including computer scams, cyber-stalking, and hacking (Helfgott, 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ The copycat effect regarding suicides has been given a specific name – the Werther Effect – from a Nineteenth Century novel by Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

^{iv} A copycat effect in the terrorism literature is frequently termed “contagion.”

^v For Gabriel Tarde “imitation” was governed by three social laws which resulted in waves of imitations continually being launched and spreading across society (Curtis, 1953). His first law of imitation, people imitate one another in proportion to how much close contact they have with one another, was similar to Sutherland’s later idea of differential association. Tarde’s other laws described the dynamics of his imitation waves relating who imitates who in a society, why societies differ in their imitation rates, and how imitated behavior diffuses through societies.

^{vi} Tarde provided a number of specific examples of what he believed to be copycat crimes and considered Jack the Ripper as a generator copycat crime (Tarde, 1912):

What more striking example of suggesto-imitative assault could there be than the series of mutilations of women, begun in the month of September 1888 in London in the Whitechapel district! Never perhaps has the pernicious influence of general news been more apparent. The newspapers were filled with the exploits of Jack the ripper, and, in less than a year, as many as eight absolutely identical crimes were committed in various crowded streets of the great city. This is not all; there followed a repetition of these same deeds outside of the capital and very soon there was even a spreading of them abroad. At Southampton attempt to mutilate a child; at Bradford horrible mutilation of another child; at Hamburg murder accompanied by disemboweling of a little girl; in the United States disemboweling of four negroes, disemboweling and mutilation of a colored woman ... (p. 340)

^{vii} The evolutionary benefit of an imitative capacity has long been recognized. Meyer Fortes (1938, pp. 45-46, cited by Miller & Dollard, 1941, p. 316) stated: “imitative behavior must be adaptive if it is to survive, . . . in an unfamiliar or difficult situation the best adaptation is to copy the actions and words of any one who understands the situation.” The behavioral opposite of imitation, invention, involves trial-and-error learning. Invention is difficult to do, is time

consuming, and error prone. By comparison, imitation is easy to do as the new behavior is taken directly from others. It is a fast and economical process to acquire useful new behaviors (Miller & Dollard, 1941).

^{viii} Charles Mackay (1848) had popularized the concept of collective behavior in a book that discussed its many strange and often hilarious aspects. Gustav LeBon initiated the first research based study of collective behavior and hypothesized that each person has some amount of animal instinct which can be activated within crowd-like settings forcing the individuals to revert when under a crowd's influence (Locher, 2002; Miller, 2000). It was not until the 1920s that the term, collective behavior, started being used and defined as "the behavior of people under the influence of a collective impulse" (Miller, 2000, p. 7).

^{ix} Tarde argued that crowds were an ancient form of human association but that the "public" was a product of modern media technology as their members are dispersed and are cohesive only through participants' awareness of a shared idea. For Tarde the media was the newspaper and "publics" were a Nineteenth Century product of the printing press, the railroad, and the telegraph (Tarde, 1901, pp. 280-281).

^x Diffusion theory also has its roots in the writings of Tarde but it was not until the 1940s that solid social research on diffusion began. Seminal diffusion research was conducted by Ryan and Gross (1943) who studied the diffusion of the adoption of hybrid seed corn in Iowa.

^{xi} Concerning the other four diffusion innovation characteristics, the *compatibility* of an innovation with pre-existing attitudes increases adoption rates. Regarding crime the media would be more likely to generate copycats when generator crimes match pre-existing values such as tolerance of criminality. The attribute of *complexity* also affects a generator crime's diffusion rate. Flexible and more generalized copycat crimes should spread faster than narrow crime types and crime requiring rigid crime techniques. A technique of on how to steal a particular automobile model based on a unique design vulnerability for example will generate fewer copycat crimes than a general carjacking technique. The *trialability* attribute of a crime technique further increases its likelihood to be copied. Crime techniques that can be practiced such as a technique for identifying and getting potential victims in a position to be victimized a number of times prior to actually robbing, raping, kidnapping, or assaulting them should increase copying. Lastly, the *observability* of a generator crime's consequences influences its diffusion. Media attention raises observability and should increase copycat crime by publicizing successful innovative generator crimes.

^{xii} The acquisition of criminal behavior via social learning is rooted in Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association. Ron Akers (1998) is the current leading voice of criminal social learning. In gist, a crime is more likely to be learned via social observation when an individual is exposed to and holds favorable definitions of crimes, sees crime as justified and or desirable, and expects to receive more rewards than punishments. All of which can be supplied by either real world or media generated criminogenic models. In a 1956 article, Daniel Glaser was the first criminologist to expressly discuss the mass media as a powerful social learning

source for crime. Prodded by the emergence of television networks, the question he addressed was whether the media could substitute for real associations in differential association. Glaser (1956) saw as a key concept “criminal identification” or “the choice of another from whose perspective we view our own behavior” (p. 440). Analogous to role playing, criminal identification operated for Glaser as a psychological process in which an individual imagined how the “identified with person” would behave and acted accordingly – a “What would Jessie James do?” process.

^{xiii} A factor that interacts with the media portrayal of punishment and consumer expectation of punishment is consumer mood. Good mood while viewing raises the belief that positive consequences of action are more likely, bad mood increases belief in negative consequences (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). Therefore, a positive mood in the media consumer would reduce the deterrent effect of observing model punishment. Popular crime action media, which generally induces a positive mood in male viewers, should by extension reduce the deterrent effect of a portrayed and observed punishment.

^{xiv} Developed in communication research to explore how the media related to attitude change, the systematic path is determined by how much thought and reflection is expended on a decision. More cognitively demanding, systematic processing is followed when it is possible to determine the validity of information and when an individual is motivated to expend the effort to systematically access and consider a lot of information before making a copycat crime decision (Schrum, 2002). In this path media consumers counter-argue with the information provided in the media content. Hence, the realistic chances of successfully copying a generator crime would be considered. The at-risk copycat would conduct an extensive search of all relevant information, evaluates the information, and weigh counter-arguments that question the validity of the media provided information. In sum, when the motivation to elaborate on media supplied information is high such as when the consequences of a failed crime attempt are seen as serious, systematic decision making would be followed (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). When the potential copycat offender is not motivated to closely search the media for crime information than heuristic cognitive processing would be employed (Shrum, 2002).

^{xv} Media reliance encourages heuristic processing and discourages systematic processing and enhances heuristic copycat crimes by making criminogenic information easy to access, higher in frequency, more recent in exposure, and more vivid in nature.

^{xvi} Defined, entertainment education is the process of designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, and change behavior (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Due to the large quantity of crime related narratives in the media, media content in general can be thought of as a haphazard entertainment-education effort. To summarize the process, when engagement with criminogenic content is high, transformation or absorption results and the consumer is transported to a world where criminal behavior is justified, rewarded, and unlikely to be punished. In high transportation, the individual can also be distanced temporarily from current and previous beliefs and experiences (Green & Brock, 2000). Hence, even when the narrative is

clearly labeled as fiction, real-world beliefs can be affected and once a reader is rolling along inside a compelling narrative, the beliefs implied in the story can be adopted regardless of whether they correspond with the media consumer's actual reality (Green & Brock, 2000).

^{xvii} In Bandura's words (1973, p. 67, 1963, p. 290): *Many things that people learn are not revealed behaviorally either because the appropriate situations do not occur or because the equipment needed to execute is lacking. TV viewers may learn from Western and crime series gun-fighting skills that are never exhibited because they do not possess firearms or if they do, the occasion to use them does not arise ... Social conditions that increase the permissibility and functional value of [a behavior] easily override the effects of personal dispositions. For this reason, it is primarily types of social inducements rather than types of people that should be examined in predicting who will put into practice what has been learned.*