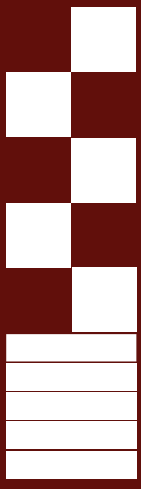
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Suggestion and Suggestibility" (1919)

Robert H. Gault

American Journal of Psychology *25: pp. 185–94 [with elisions].*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

While the forgoing illustrate the incursion of suggestion into instinct theory and behaviorism, the passages also speak to the sensitivity of the social psychological community to the variable conditions of suggestibility. As noted, this was a chord struck in the foundational work on the doctrine, but one that became ever more pronounced as researchers continued their studies of the phenomenon through the 1910s and 1920s.

The following two identically titled articles, one from the *American Journal of Psychology* and one from the *British Journal of Psychology,* offer illustrations. Given the nature of the publishing venues, they also underscore the prominence of suggestion theory in the literature at the time.

The first is by Robert Gault (1874–1971), who was a pupil of Ross. With his BA from Cornell University (1902) and PhD from the University of Pennsylvania (1905), Gault specialized in criminal psychology and criminology. He taught at Northwestern University for thirty years and authored three well-regarded texts in the field: *Social Psychology* (1923), *Criminology* (1932), and *Outline of General Psychology* (1925).

Suggestion and suggestibility, as the title indicates, are his foci in the following article. Like most of the authors of this period, he has abandoned crowd theory and positions suggestion in a stimulus-response paradigm that requires on the part of the subject "a readiness to respond to suggestion." It must operate "as an indirect appeal which awakens a determining tendency in such a way that the subject has more the sense of acting on his own initiative than of responding to external influence."

Beyond definitions, the article deals with the ways in which—and reasons why—differing demographic groups respond differently to suggestion. Here he diverges from prior authors, such as Ross, who see susceptibility to suggestion as innate in gender and ethnicity. Softening somewhat the misogyny and racism, Gault argues that resistance is a consequence of a psychological disposition to more thoughtfully assess a suggestion, and this is gained through life experience. Therefore, he writes, "the race and sex factors as determinants of the degree of suggestibility may very easily be overdone." The claimed suggestibility of the American Indians, he says, can essentially be accounted for by their culture, and "as women mingle more and more freely in the life outside of the home they will gradually build up those complexes which in time will undoubtedly place them on the same level with men in point of suggestibility." He concludes with the Progressive's optimism for improved thoughtfulness through improved education.—*P.P.*

References

Gault, Robert, and Delton Howard. 1925. *Outline of General Psychology*. New York: Longmans, Green.

Gault, Robert. 1923. *Social Psychology.* New York: Henry Holt.

Gault, Robert. 1932. *Criminology*. Boston: DC Heath.

"Suggestion and Suggestibility" (1919)

The words "suggestion" and "suggestibility" are the playthings of the tyro. He flourishes them as the key to most of the situations presented by human behavior as exhibited in crowds, mobs, and audiences. The reactions of one to another, as those of salesman and purchaser also, are often "explained" by the application of one or the other of these words.

In this article we (1) discuss two definitions of suggestion and suggestibility, and (2) describe the conditions that affect both. This should enable us (3) to understand the limitations of suggestion and suggestibility as means of arriving at large social unities.

Titchener defines suggestion as "any stimulus, external or internal, accompanied or unaccompanied by consciousness, which touches off a determining tendency."[1] For example, in the simple reaction experiment the instruction to react on a given signal sets off a determining tendency which releases the reaction movement. What made the reactor ready to accept instruction? What brought him into the laboratory? What brought him to the university? What brought him to seek an education in any university? In each case a previous suggestion. The reaction to this train of previous suggestion, each in its turn, has developed a complex disposition because of which the reaction is made as a matter of course, once the stimulus is presented.

This definition makes suggestion no different from a command or a sensory stimulus. To understand the response to a command or a sensory stimulus we must assume that a tendency or a disposition has already been prepared which is of such a nature that it may be touched off by the appropriate word, gesture, or other stimulus. We would not command an ox to attend to the demonstration of a geometrical proposition because we assume that the animal has no disposition favorable to such a reaction. Nor is suggestion in this case different from any stimulus in the technical sense. A certain visual impression awakens the train of processes which ends in the emotion of fear. But the visual stimulus occasioned by the presence of a serpent, e.g., could have no relation to fear were there not already a determining tendency to be touched off by it. It is difficult to conceive of any reaction that is not a response to a suggestion according to this definition.

Again we have suggestion defined by Bunnermann, not as an external condition or stimulus, but as a mental state of expectancy or emotional disturbance: as an unusual working of the function of interpretation due to expectancy or emotional disturbance.[2]

If we accept the view that expectancy is a state both of mental and physiological readiness or preparedness for response—more or less definite response according as attention is more or less sharply focused in a particular direction—then this definition confuses suggestion in Titchener's sense with the "determining tendency." But Titchener's "tendency" is as substantial

[1] *A Text-Book of Psychology* (New York, 1910), p. 450.

[2] G. Bunnermann, "Ueber psychogene Schmerzen," *Monatschr. fur Psychiat. W. Neur.*, XXXIV (1913), 142–71.

as human nature. Bunnermann's, on the other hand, is temporary. It is as fleeting as any emotion or state of expectancy. Titchener emphasizes the usualness of suggestion and response; Bunnermann describes it as "unusual."

Nearly all definitions of suggestion now in vogue closely approximate one or the other of the foregoing. There is, moreover, the intolerable popular definition of suggestion as the transmission of a conviction or an idea from one person to another.

An adequate treatment of suggestion and suggestibility must recognize the functioning of the stimulus and the more or less stable dispositions or tendencies of human nature. Nothing is gained by overlapping the command and other methods of obtaining response in the behavior of others. It should recognize suggestibility as a condition of readiness to respond to suggestion: as usual and normal, not as unusual and abnormal; as sharpened temporarily by fleeting expectation and by emotional disturbances. But suggestibility is not a wholly temporary emotional condition. On the other hand, a stable background of dispositions or complexes in our organization accounts for a certain degree of constancy in our readiness to accept suggestion. The sensitiveness of this background and its freedom from inhibitions determines our degree of suggestibility.

We will think of suggestion, then, not as a direct appeal such as a command issued by one person to another, nor as a sensory stimulus other than a command which immediately awakens a reflex motor response or a mental reaction, but as an indirect appeal which awakens a determining tendency in such a way that the subject has more the sense of acting on his own initiative than of responding to external influence. He appears to be acting on his own initiative because, as in the hypnotic state, there is a degree of dissociation between the tendency or disposition that is then active and others that would ordinarily hold its activity in check. It is not meant to be implied that in response to suggestion one is altogether passive. Indeed, in one aspect, active expectancy and desire is a determining tendency such as we have in mind.

Suggestibility is understood, therefore, as that condition of the organism in which one or another determining tendency or disposition may express itself with relative freedom. In extreme suggestibility this freedom of expression is most marked. It is untrammeled by the inhibitions that normally control. The active disposition or tendency has been, partially, at least, dissociated from others, to use a phrase that is current among students of the abnormal mind. In other words, it functions at least in a consider-

able degree of independence of the whole system of dispositions that make up the personality. This is the point of view that is represented by Sidis.[3] "Abnormal suggestibility is a disaggregation of consciousness, a slit, a scar, produced in the mind, a crack that may extend wider and deeper, ending at last in the total disjunction of the waking, guiding, controlling consciousness from the reflex consciousness; from the rest of the stream of life." In normal suggestibility the lesion effected in the body of consciousness is superficial, transitory, fleeting. In abnormal suggestibility, on the contrary, the slit is deep and lasting—it is a severe gash. In both cases, however, we have a removal, a dissociation of the waking from the subwaking, reflex consciousness, and suggestion is effected only through the latter. It is the subwaking, the reflex, not the waking, the controlling consciousness that is suggestible. Suggestibility is the attribute, the very essence of the subwaking, reflex consciousness. [...] Suggestibility varies as the degree of disaggregation, and inversely as the unification of consciousness.

If this is the correct view of the case we are prepared to understand that there are two large types of background for suggestibility. One is in our natural, the other in our acquired, dispositions. There is our superstitious nature which is never quite held in leash by our scientific and professional habits. Signs and portents, shadows in the moonlight, etc., affect our attitudes and our behavior more than we are often willing to acknowledge, and bring into the foreground of consciousness images and fears with their appropriate reactions which appear to the observer, in view of the occasioning shadow or what not, to be very far-fetched.

They produce their effects by reason of the existence in the organism of a disposition fostered in us by years of wondering at phenomena which we are unable to understand. This disposition is never fully integrated with our acquisitions; it is always more or less dissociated from those dispositions that would control it, and it is, therefore, so to speak, upon a hair trigger and ready to be touched off upon slight provocation. [...]

Again, it is the native disposition to follow after the strong, or those who show evidence of strength, that makes us peculiarly susceptible to the men and women of prestige, whether their prestige is due to social or economic, or professional position; to physical or mental qualities for leadership, or what not. The reports concerning testimony offered by children show how fatally the replies of the young are determined by the character of the questions that are put to them in court. Note, for example, a very striking case in

[3] *The Psychology of Suggestion*, pp. 88, 89.

Belgium in 1910: three little girls, aged nine and ten, had been playing by the roadside. In the evening they separated; two who were sisters went together to their home and the third set off in a different direction to her home. The next morning this girl was found by the roadside, murdered. The two sisters were awakened and asked of the whereabouts of their companion of the day before. They replied, "We do not know." Nevertheless the detectives in the case succeeded in putting into their mouths the statement that they had seen a stranger on the previous day, a man who stopped to speak with them. He wore a black mustache, a slouch hat, and black clothing. Such a man was then arrested and brought to trial. There was additional incriminating testimony by the two sisters: questions and answers aggregated hundreds of pages in typewritten form. The defense sought and obtained permission to try an experiment in testimony. He brought a group of school children into the courtroom and plied them with questions concerning the man who, on that morning, had crossed their school yard and engaged their teacher in conversation at the door of the school. The children's answers built up a detailed account of the appearance of the man, even to his necktie, and they spoke of their teacher's agitation when the stranger had gone. As a matter of fact no stranger had been seen on the school premises on that day. The questioner had been able to play upon their sensitive complexes and to stimulate spontaneous expression. The whole performance illustrates the play of suggestion upon a suggestible make-up.[4]

Children have not the advantage of acquired disposition, the results of experience, to hold in check their tendency to ally themselves with the apparently strong, and consequently they give assent whereas they would otherwise withhold it. The effect would be the same if these experiences had in fact been acquired but had been dissociated from more primitive tendencies.

The race and sex factors as determinants of the degree of suggestibility may very easily be overdone. It is true, as Ross says,[5] that the American Indian, far from being a thoroughly impassive creature, is extremely susceptible to suggestive influences. He cites the instance of the ghost-dance religion that spread among the Indians from 1889 to 1892, and took possession of probably sixty thousand souls. The central features of this phenomenon were a sacred dance and hypnotizing operations upon the dancers who had begun

[4] See Varendonc, "Les temoinages d'enfants clans un proces retentissant," *Arch. de Psychol*., XI (1911), 129, 171.

[5] *Social Psychology*, p. 14. See also the F*ourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, p. 917.

to show signs of ecstasy. "They kept up dancing until fully one hundred persons were lying unconscious. They then stopped and seated themselves in a circle, and as each one recovered from his trance, he was brought to the center of the ring to relate his experience."

This is a case in which a superstitious disposition, or a crude religious nature, unhindered by the checks that prevail among most cultured people, has been able to express itself freely. It is probable that a member of any other race, brought up from infancy in an American-Indian environment, would behave in like fashion. The often-quoted data from Starbuck[6] to the effect that women are much more susceptible than men to religious influence; that in religious revivals "men display more friction against surroundings, more difficulty with points of belief, more doubt arising from educational influences, more readiness to question traditional beliefs and customs, more pronounced tendency to resist conviction, to pray, to call on God, to lose sleep and appetite" lend further support to the principle stated above—that suggestibility is to be explained on the ground of the degree of dissociation of a complex disposition, or system-complex from controlling dispositions. Practically such a dissociation is illustrated in the suggestibility of woman. Compared with man she has been in relative isolation from the affairs of practical life outside the home. Outside that sphere she has not acquired the disposition, therefore, to examine narrowly before judging or acting. She does not possess those complexes, normal among active men in contact with the world, which express themselves in the control that characterizes the conservative. [...]

As women mingle more and more freely in the life outside of the home they will gradually build up those complexes which in time will undoubtedly place them on the same level with men in point of suggestibility. [...]

It is by no means wholly the native disposition which determines the degree and direction of suggestibility when it is partially or entirely dissociated from controlling complexes. The acquired disposition or the product of education is potent also. You seat yourself before a bank of electric lamps and place your fingers upon a coiled wire which is apparently in circuit with the lamps, and when these are lighted the coil will seem to the unsuspecting observer to grow warm, even though a secret switch beneath the table may be so thrown as to allow the current to pass only through the lamps and not through the coil. Here is a suggestion that indirectly produces a thermal sensation. But the subject could not have been suggestible in this respect had he

[6] *American Journal of Psychology*, VIII, 271.

not acquired a certain disposition (an electricity-complex, we may say) in the course of his experience up to that time with electric currents and hot wires. Likewise, the professional disposition or complex of the physician renders him suggestible in the face of situations that leave the carpenter untouched. The physician, for example, responds with enthusiasm to a movement for paving the streets because it "suggests" to him what never occurred to the proposers—the improvement of sanitary conditions. [...]

Evidently if we have correctly analyzed the concepts of suggestion and suggestibility, the possibility of successfully employing these means alone to build up large social unities is limited by three factors: (1) racial and other native differences, (2) prejudices due to social and economic position, (3) inequalities in education and want of uniform experience among sections of the population.

Wherever there is a group of people with so much in common that they constitute a crowd, a mob, an audience, the readers of a particular periodical or the disciples of a particular *ism,* there is opportunity for a fairly wide-sweeping interplay of suggestion and suggestibility. As the means and frequency of communication among men increases, and as localism becomes swallowed up in nationalism and more, we should expect an increase in the waves of suggestive phenomena were there no counterbalancing factor. Such a factor is provided, however, more and more generously as the years come and go, in our institutions for higher learning, in industry and commerce, in as far as they cultivate a disposition to seek first-hand data and weigh the evidence.