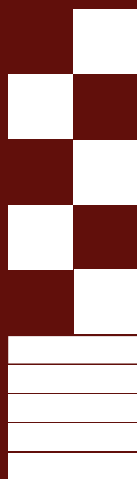


# Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

*Selected Readings, 1895–1935*

edited by  
Patrick Parsons

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edited by Patrick Parsons

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

# *Social Psychology* (1924)

Floyd Henry Allport

*New York: Houghton Mifflin, pp. 4–5, 242–52 [with elisions].*

### EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Nothing could have been further from the theorizing of Trotter or Le Bon than the work of Floyd Allport (1890–1979). Where they privileged the collective—the crowd and the herd—Allport saw only the individual. He rejected fundamentally the proposal that there existed a “crowd mind” or “crowd spirit” somehow independent of and metaphysically beyond the individual. Only individuals were real or concrete and as such must constitute the starting unit of any social analysis. The behavior of assemblages of people in crowds, or even institutions, had to be studied from the ground up, so to speak.

He also rejected McDougall's instinct theory, and, like Thorndike, adopted an early form of behaviorism as his theoretical tool of choice. At the same time, and in keeping with both men, he accepted the psychological essence of suggestion theory and integrated it into his larger theoretical framework.

It may be a cliché, but it would be a fitting one, to call Allport a giant in the history of social psychology. His 1924 book, *Social Psychology*, stands with the 1908 texts by McDougall and Ross as foundational in the field. Allport was of midwestern stock, one of four brothers, including another eminent social psychologist, Gordon Allport. Floyd Allport received his AB (1913) in psychology and PhD (1919) from Harvard University. After World War

I, he returned to Harvard as an assistant instructor then spent two years (1922–24) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before moving to Syracuse University, where he spent the remainder of his career. Appointed chair of the new Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Allport became a respected and well-liked researcher, teacher, and mentor, creating the university's doctoral program in social psychology.

Allport held that research in social psychology must be empirical and experimental. He pioneered experimental design in the field with a heavy emphasis on the careful measurement of attitude formation and change. But although the individual had to be the locus of measurement, the ultimate objective was to understand the influence of the group on a person's attitudes and behavior. One piece of the puzzle engaged the concept of suggestion, which Allport saw as integral in the larger cognitive mechanism of influence. Adopting and advancing a stimulus-response model, Allport accepted the idea of innate human predispositions, which he termed "prepotent tendencies" or "reflexes," but argued they were largely the consequence of social conditioning. A suggestion, then, denoted "a certain relation of stimulus and response operative between individuals." Functionally, a suggestion, in this view, could either help create a new conditioned attitudinal association or trigger an existing one.

"When we accept an opinion uncritically," he stated, "using it as a basis for our belief or action, we may be said to respond to a suggestion." The process, more specifically, was one in which "[the individual] who gives the stimulus controls the behavior and the consciousness of the recipient in an immediate manner, relatively uninfluenced by thought, and through the method of building up motor attitudes, releasing them, or augmenting the released response as it is being carried out."

In the following excerpt, Allport begins by dismantling the analytical claims ("illusions") of the crowd theorists, then moves to suggestion, considering extant definitions and detailing his physiological view of the spoken word and its suggestive effect "in the automatic and unconscious nature of language controls." He describes suggestion in the process attitude formation and in the activation of existing attitudes, and he reviews "the conditions of suggestibility." Here he cites by then long-standing variables, including age, gender, and the prestige of the speaker (wherein he alludes to McDougall's ideas on submission). He also describes the increased suggestibility of the individual in a group context: "We bow before the will of the majority." And he offers the applied example of advertising, which "play(s) freely upon sug-

gestibility toward both prestige and large numbers.” In conclusion, he offers a half dozen recommendations for strengthening the effectiveness of suggestion, including the use of indirect suggestion, positive rather than negative suggestions, and repetition as in the monotony and rhythm of chanting.

Allport’s work pointed the direction for subsequent researchers for many years, and that included, at least until the 1940s, an important place for suggestion theory.—*P.P.*

## *Social Psychology (1924)*

### **Social Psychology as a Science of the Individual. The Group Fallacy.**

Impressed by the closely knit and reciprocal nature of social behavior, some writers have been led to postulate a kind of ‘collective mind’ or ‘group consciousness’ as separate from the minds of the individuals of whom the group is composed. No fallacy is more subtle and misleading than this. It has appeared in the literature under numerous guises; but has everywhere left the reader in a state of mystical confusion. Several forms of this theory will be examined presently. The standpoint of this book may be concisely stated as follows. There is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals. Social psychology must not be placed in contradistinction to the psychology of the individual; it is a part of the psychology of the individual, whose behavior it studies in relation to that sector of his environment comprised by his fellows. His biological needs are the ends toward which his social behavior is a developed means. Within his organism are provided all the mechanisms by which social behavior is explained. There is likewise no consciousness except that belonging to individuals. Psychology in all its branches is a science of the individual. To extend its principles to larger units is to destroy their meaning.

**Psychological Forms of the Group Fallacy. 1. The ‘Crowd Mind.’** The most flagrant form of the group fallacy is the notion of crowd consciousness.<sup>1</sup> It has long been observed that persons in an excited mob seem to lose control of themselves, and to be swept along by tempestuous emotions and impelling ideas. It is therefore alleged that there is a lapse of personal consciousness and a rise of a common or ‘crowd’ consciousness. The objections to this view are

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<sup>1</sup>An interesting point of difference, however, exists in the social as distinguished from other environmental relations. In the social sphere the environment not only stimulates the individual but is stimulated by him. Other persons not only cause us to react; they also react in turn to stimulations produced by us. A circular character is thus present in social behavior which is wanting in the simpler non-social adjustments.



fairly obvious. Psychologists agree in regarding consciousness as dependent upon the functioning of neural structure. Nervous systems are possessed by individuals; but there is no nervous system of the crowd. Secondly, the passing emotion or impulse common to the members of a crowd is not to be isolated introspectively from the sensations and feelings peculiar to the individual himself.

Another argument for crowd mind proceeds as follows. The turbulent and riotous deeds of a mob point to the existence of a 'mob consciousness,' for such behavior would be quite unthinkable for men in their right minds taken separately and in isolation. There is an element of absurdity in this argument: we are asked to explain the nature of crowd action by considering the individuals in isolation; that is, when there is no crowd at all. The mere adding up of the reactions of isolated individuals has no meaning whatsoever beyond mere enumeration. But given the situation of the word—that is, of a number of persons within stimulating distance of one another we shall find that the actions of all are nothing more than the sum of the actions of each taken separately. When we say that the crowd is excited, impulsive, and irrational, we mean that the individuals in it are excited, impulsive, and irrational. It is true that they would probably not be in this state if they were in isolation from one another; but that means that only in the close group each is so stimulated by the emotional behavior of others that he becomes excited to an unusual degree. The failure to take note of these interstimulations and reactions between individuals has given rise to the illusion that a 'crowd mind' suddenly descends upon the individuals and takes possession of them. The crowd as a whole has been attended to rather than the individual members. Spectacular mob action has thus combined with loose terminology to draw attention away from the true source of crowd explanation, namely, the individual. [...]

### *Suggestion*

**Various Definitions of Suggestion.** The term 'suggestion,' like sympathy and imitation, denotes a certain relation of stimulus and response operative between individuals. Like sympathy it will be seen to involve no unique type of process, and like imitation it is a collective term embracing a number of distinct elementary mechanisms. When we accept an opinion uncritically, using it as a basis for our belief or action, we may be said to respond to a suggestion. Thus Professor McDougall considers suggestion as a process resulting in the acceptance of a proposition in the absence of logically

adequate grounds. Professor Stern defines it as “the imitative assumption of a mental attitude under the illusion of assuming it spontaneously.” Both these statements indicate the relatively unconscious nature of the process; but the latter broadens the notion from a matter of mere belief to a mental ‘attitude,’ thus implying some action or readiness to act. Professor Baldwin introduces an explanatory element in his definition, and includes, like Stern, a motor factor. He regards the process as a mechanism of attention which narrows the consciousness and motor impulses to restricted lines, and inhibits attitudes of discrimination and selection. It is here justly recognized that suggestion has a negative aspect, namely, the inhibiting of consciousness and action of a nature antagonistic to the suggested proposition. Finally, Münsterberg conceived the process entirely in the behavioristic terms of action and inhibition. A suggestion, according to him, is “a proposition to action which overcomes antagonistic impulses” in the subject. The only criticism one can apply to these definitions is that, while each suggests an important aspect of response to suggestion, each is too limited to do justice to all the types and phases of the process.

**The Potency of Spoken Language in Bodily Control.** Before attempting a complete analysis of suggestion, it will be profitable to consider the capabilities of the mechanism through which the suggestion is generally brought to bear, namely, the response of bodily effectors to language stimuli. The spoken word has a more profound effect upon the human organism than is commonly recognized. This effect is shown in two ways: (1) in the automatic and unconscious nature of language controls, and (2) in the far-reaching and complete character of the bodily changes produced.

The first aspect is illustrated by the circular speech reflexes, in which the sound of a word directly stimulates the response of pronouncing it. As adults we unconsciously employ these mechanisms in the reiteration of phrases spoken by others with whose opinions we are in perfect agreement. Echolalia is an abnormal extreme of the same phenomenon. Aphasia presents similar features in that spoken words, which the patient through his disorder has lost all means of understanding, may be written mechanically by him from dictation. “Psychopathic obedience” is a condition in which the patient immediately executes every action proposed to him. Perfectly normal individuals also show at times an immediate and undeliberated response to commands. These effects are based upon deeply fixed habits of association between word sounds and the bodily movements which they signify. It is convenient to regard them as sub-cortical or ‘short-circuited’ modes of re-

sponse, having their centers at a lower level of the nervous system than the portions concerned with thought and meaning. While this explanation is still a hypothesis, it fits well with the description of the suggestion consciousness as an unreasoned and immediate acceptance of a proposal.

The influence of language not only approaches an immediate reflex; it is also remarkably thorough and far reaching. Hypnosis, which is essentially a state of heightened suggestibility, presents the clearest examples. By repeated suggestion the operator gains absolute control of all the mechanisms of the body. The resistance being broken down, the statement "You cannot open your eyes" takes immediate effect, and the subject actually cannot move his lids. The auditory impulse enters the central nervous system and goes immediately out to the effectors. It is as though one were talking directly to the muscles of the subject. [...]

**Suggestion Defined as a Control of Attitude.** This then is the type of physiological effect produced by verbal suggestion. An example of post-hypnotic suggestion will lead us to a still closer view of the normal mechanism. It is suggested under hypnosis that at six o'clock the subject will go to the telephone and call up a certain friend. A motor setting is thus prepared to perform this act at a certain signal, the approach of the hour of six; and when the time comes the subject, though now no longer under hypnosis, automatically performs the act. The motor set thus built up by suggestion we may call an attitude. In everyday life attitudes are built up in similar fashion. We talk over with our friend the feasibility of some civic project, or the merits of the new minister; and quite without knowing it we become set to react in accordance with this discussion when suitable occasion arises. We accept the words of an expert on any subject and repeat them to our friends as spontaneously as if they were our own. A suggestion from a friend regarding our appearance, manners, or habits may determine in us a fixed attitude to react in the direction suggested. A refractory child may with tact be talked into an attitude of yielding graciously to suggestions regarding his conduct. An enemy may often be handled in the same manner. All examples of this sort involve a preparatory setting of the synapses at the motor centers and possibly increases in tonicity of the muscles to be employed in carrying out the line of behavior suggested.

Suggestion is concerned with the control of bodily attitudes in three possible ways. First, it serves to build up or prepare the setting for a definite response when the releasing signal is given. The examples just mentioned belong to this category. Secondly, it may serve as the signal (social stimulus)

which releases the attitude already established. And thirdly, suggestion may augment the released response as it is being carried out. These three effects of suggestion will be illustrated in the following sections.

**1. Suggestion in the Formation of Attitudes.** There is a great power in the spoken word; but it is not a magic power. Every normal suggestion builds up its attitude upon some deep-lying reaction tendency already present. Interests, emotions, sentiments, derived drives, and innate prepotent reactions (see Chapter III) serve as bases. A classic example is the jealousy and suspicion of Othello wrought upon by the persistent artifices of Iago until an attitude of infuriated vengeance toward Desdemona was developed. Advertisers notoriously exploit human drives in building up an attitude to purchase their products. Here also repeated suggestion is used in the attitude-forming process. Quality, good value, and the satisfaction of every form of human need are associated persistently with the particular trade name. [...]

**2. Suggestion in the Release of Attitudes.** There are situations in which previous events *have already* given rise to a motor setting, and in which the suggestion serves merely to release the act for which the body is prepared. Persons deprived of loved ones by the late war have developed an attitude of yearning expectancy concerning some future contact with the souls of the dead. Spiritualistic mediums and *ouija* boards have provided suggestions for the release of these tendencies; and an international craze for things 'psychic' has been the result. Yawning when others yawn is not sheer imitation. It occurs principally when we are tired and on the point of yawning ourselves. With this preparation the sight of the act serves as a release of the act in question. We have long standing attitudes of respect and obedience to age, prestige, and expert opinion. Hence any language suggestion from sources of this character liberates the response suggested.

The release of motor settings often involves the principle of allied and antagonistic responses. Suppose one is starting from home on a cloudy morning. The appearance of the sky is a stimulus which tends to evoke the response of getting an umbrella. Thoughts of inconvenience and of the chance that it may not rain represent a neural setting of an antagonistic sort, that is, leaving the umbrella behind. A friend suggests that the sky indicates rain, and immediately an allied stimulus is added to the attitude for taking the umbrella, and the antagonistic setting for leaving it is inhibited. The allied stimulus of the suggestion in this case is the deciding factor.

Both the formation and the release of attitudes are illustrated by familiar instances of suggestion. The art of the salesman is to build up a setting to

purchase his product in the neuromuscular system of the prospect. When such a setting is developed and strengthened through argument and demonstration, the 'psychological moment' must be grasped and the contract blank produced or the direct suggestion to purchase delivered. The attitude is therewith released. [...]

**3. Suggestion in the Increase of Responses already Released.** The third effect of suggestion is related to the second. We have just seen that social influences help to discharge motor settings already prepared, as in going up to shake hands with the forgiven darky and in feeling an emotion of tenderness toward him. After these responses have been set off they may be *intensified* by a continuance of the same social stimuli that brought them about. Thus one would go forward *more quickly*, and his emotion would reach a *higher pitch*, because he continued to see others doing the same act. The social stimulus thus serves as a suggestion not only for releasing the reaction but for augmenting it as it is being carried out. In both cases it serves as an allied stimulus and is contributory to a motor setting already existing. The term *social facilitation* may be used to include both these effects (releasing and intensifying).

In the old-fashioned religious revival we find all three effects of suggestion upon attitude and response. First, through the preaching of 'hell fire' and 'conviction of sin,' the attitude of penitence is built up. Secondly, this setting is released by the invitation-hymn and the call to come forward. And thirdly, the acts bespeaking self-surrender and the cries of religious ecstasy from others increase the ardor of the emotional reaction of each convert. Situations of this sort will be more closely analyzed in the two following chapters. It is sufficient here to recognize them as forms of response to suggestion.

**Conditioned Response in Suggestion.** [...] Many suggestions not involving language are based on [...] the use of acts and objects usually accompanying a response as conditioning stimuli for bringing about the response at the will of the suggester. Boys, for example, enjoy the prank of sucking a lemon in front of the trombone player in a band in order to harass his performance by the conditioned puckerings of his mouth. The eccentric who goes hatless and gloveless in zero weather probably derives satisfaction in the knowledge that his habits are causing others to shiver. Hurrying to complete his lecture at the close of the hour, the professor is often distracted by the youth who leans forward and sits on the edge of his seat in order to produce a conditioning suggestion for bringing the remarks to a close.

**The Conditions of Suggestibility.** The main conditions favoring suggestion, like those for sympathy, represent the 'openness' of the organism to the stimulating suggestion, and are based, in particular, upon an attitude of submissiveness toward the suggester. High self-expression in personality traits, physical strength, superior social position, and prestige through power or knowledge place their possessors in an ascendant relation to those with whom they come in contact, thus giving their behavior a suggestive influence. Sex is sometimes a determinant of a suggestible attitude, females usually standing in the submissive rôle toward males, and hence susceptible to suggestions from them. Difference of age is also a strong factor in responsiveness to suggestion. Since most of the child's knowledge comes from his elders, and also because he feels his physical weakness before them, he has formed the attitude of accepting all their suggestions without question. Where, as in childish ignorance, conviction is based entirely upon the authority of the speaker, suggestion shades imperceptibly into simple belief. Poverty of ideas and extreme submissiveness are thus the causes of the notorious suggestibility of childhood.<sup>2</sup>

A situation which speedily places one in an attitude of submissive suggestibility is the presence of a group, or indeed the mere allusion to large numbers. We bow before the will of the majority. We rise irresistibly when the congregation rises, clap when the audience claps, and express disapproval in unison with the throng. Adherence to style and custom is based in part upon the attitude of submission to suggestion from great numbers. The mere fact of being in a crowd places one in this setting, and so prepares for the release of specific actions suggested by the behavior of the others.

Advertisers play freely upon suggestibility toward both prestige and large numbers. Placards announce that a certain remedy is endorsed by eminent physicians (a picture representing one of them often accompanies), or that thousands have been cured by it and are ready to extol its virtues. Professor H. T. Moore has measured the susceptibility of individuals to these forms of suggestion by having them pass judgment upon the seriousness of grammatical errors and moral faults, and upon the æsthetic value of musical cadences. A set of judgments was first obtained without any suggestive influence; and another set was taken later after telling the subjects (1) the opinion of the majority and (2) the opinion of 'experts' in regard to each of the items to be evaluated. The tendency to change their previous judgments to accord

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<sup>2</sup>The same considerations apply to the unusual suggestibility of ignorant adults, and to the widespread belief in the Middle Ages in miraculous events backed by the authority of the clergy.

with the majority opinion on speech and morals was found to be almost five times as great as the change which might be expected by mere chance. The effect of suggestion in the case of expert opinion was slightly less, but still substantially large, the subjects altering almost half of their former judgments which were at variance with the stated opinion of experts.<sup>3</sup> [...]

To complete our account we may mention a number of devices and special conditions for rendering suggestions effective. 1. It is useful closely to concentrate the subject's attention by instruction or artifice so that the suggested proposal alone is received. 2. Monotony and rhythm, as in the chants of the medicine man or the passes of the hypnotist, relax and soothe the subject, and place him in a drowsy state of non-resistance. 3. Indirect suggestion takes the recipient off guard by avoiding the direct issue at first until a suitable attitude can be prepared for its acceptance. This method was employed in the story of the negro penitent. 4. A similar distraction of attention is produced by the interesting motions made by the conjurer with his right hand while his left un-obtrusively performs the trick. 5. Fatigue and intoxicants sometimes increase suggestibility. 6. It is important, finally, to word a suggestion in a positive rather than a negative manner. We have no response attitude for "thou shalt not"; therefore we often translate the phrase for purposes of action into "thou shalt." The skilled publicity agent never prints the slogan that "the cause cannot fail." He assures the public instead that "the cause is *certain to succeed!*"

**Final Definition of Suggestion.** Throughout the preceding discussion we have spoken of 'response to suggestion' rather than of suggestion as a form of response in itself. There are two senses in which the word may be used: namely, as stimulus, and as the behavior process of the response. The former use is rather more distinctive than the latter. 'A suggestion' is always a very definite thing; whereas the process of suggestion contains little that is unique. The attitude, for instance, of the runner crouching on the mark, and the release as he springs forward at the pistol shot, differ in no essential way from the physiological processes operative in cases that we would more appropriately term 'suggestion.' It might be stated that the suggestion process is characteristically, though not invariably, a response to a social form of stimulation, and that it implies a relation of ascendance and

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<sup>3</sup>The effect of both classes of suggestion upon judgments of musical preference was much lower. Evidently we are most susceptible to social influences in regard to matters which are likely to affect our social standing, as in this case, our speech and conduct. In regard to standards of language the majority opinion was found to have somewhat more weight than that of experts. See reference at the end of this chapter.

submission, that is, the control of one person by another (cf. Münsterberg's definition). If we add that the neural pathways used are more immediate and less accompanied by thought consciousness than in other responses to language, the picture is fairly complete. The following somewhat cumbersome definition will serve to summarize the nature of suggestion, both as process and as stimulus.

*Suggestion is a process involving elementary behavior mechanisms in response to a social stimulus; the nature of the process being that the one who gives the stimulus controls the behavior and consciousness of the recipient in an immediate manner, relatively uninfluenced by thought, and through the method of building up motor attitudes, releasing them, or augmenting the released response as it is being carried out.*

*'A suggestion' is a social stimulus producing the effect just described.*