# AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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# CHAPTER IV

## SOME GENERAL OR NON-SPECIFIC INNATE TENDENCIES

IN this chapter we have to consider certain innate tendencies of the human mind of great importance for social life which are sometimes ascribed to special instincts, but which are more properly classed apart from the instinctive tendencies. For we have seen that an instinct, no matter how profoundly modified it may be in the developed human mind as regards the conditions of its excitement and the actions in which it manifests itself, always retains unchanged its essential and permanent nucleus; this nucleus is the central part of the innate disposition, the excitement of which determines an affective state or emotion of specific quality and a native impulse towards some specific end. And the tendencies to be considered in this chapter have no such specific characters, but are rather of a many-sided and general nature. Consider, for example, the tendency to imitate—the modes of action in which this tendency expresses itself and the accompanying subjective states are as various as the things or actions that can be imitated.

### *Sympathy or the Sympathetic Induction of the Emotions*

The three most important of these pseudo-instincts, as they might be called, are suggestion, imitation, and

sympathy. They are closely allied as regards their effects, for in each case the process in which the tendency manifests itself involves an interaction between at least two individuals, one of whom is the agent, while the other is the person acted upon or patient; and in each case the result of the process is some degree of assimilation of the actions and mental state of the patient to those of the agent. They are three forms of mental interaction of fundamental importance for all social life, both of men and animals. These processes of mental interaction, of impression and reception, may involve chiefly the cognitive aspect of mental process, or its affective or its conative aspect. In the first case, when some presentation, idea, or belief of the agent directly induces a similar presentation, idea, or belief in the patient, the process is called one of suggestion; when an affective or emotional excitement of the agent induces a similar affective excitement in the patient, the process is one of sympathy or sympathetic induction of emotion or feeling; when the most prominent result of the process of interaction is the assimilation of the bodily movements of the patient to those of the agent, we speak of imitation.

Now, M. Tarde[1] and Professor Baldwin[2] have singled out imitation as the all-important social process, and Baldwin, like most contemporary writers, attributes it to an instinct of imitation. But careful consideration of the nature of imitative actions shows that they are of many kinds, that they issue from mental processes of a number of different types, and that none are attributable to a specific instinct of imitation, while many are due to sympathy and others to suggestion. We

[1] "Les Lois de l'Imitation." Paris, 1904.

[2] "Mental Development," and "Social and Ethical Interpretations."

must therefore first consider sympathy and suggestion, and, after defining them as precisely as possible, go on to consider the varieties of imitative action.

*Sympathy* is by some authors ascribed to a special instinct of sympathy, and even Professor James has been misled by the confused usage of common speech and has said "sympathy is an emotion."[1] But the principles maintained in the foregoing chapter will not allow us to accept either of these views. The word "sympathy," as popularly used, generally implies a tender regard for the person with whom we are said to sympathise. But such sympathy is only one special and complex form of sympathetic emotion, in the strict and more general sense of the words. The fundamental and primitive form of sympathy is exactly what the word implies, a suffering with, the experiencing of any feeling or emotion when and because we observe in other persons or creatures the expression of that feeling or emotion.[2]

Sympathetic induction of emotion is displayed in the simplest and most unmistakable fashion by many, probably by all, of the gregarious animals; and it is easy to understand how greatly it aids them in their struggle for existence. One of the clearest and commonest examples is the spread of fear and its flight-impulse among the members of a flock or herd. Many gregarious animals utter when startled a characteristic cry of fear; when this cry is emitted by one member of a flock or herd, it immediately excites the flight-impulse in all of its fellows who are within hearing of it; the whole herd, flock, or covey takes to flight like one individual. Or again, one of a pack of gregarious

[1] *Op. cit.*, ii., p. 410.

[2] This truth has been clearly expressed by Herbert Spencer ("Principles of Psychology," vol. ii., p. 563), and Bain recognised it, although, as we have seen, he failed to hold it consistently.

hunting animals, dogs or wolves, comes upon a fresh trail, sights the prey, and pursues it, uttering a characteristic yelp that excites the instinct of pursuit in all his fellows and brings them yelping behind him. Or two dogs begin to growl or fight, and at once all the dogs within sound and sight stiffen themselves and show every symptom of anger. Or one beast in a herd stands arrested, gazing in curiosity on some unfamiliar object, and presently his fellows also, to whom the object may be invisible, display curiosity and come up to join in the examination of the object. In all these cases we observe only that the behaviour of one animal, upon the excitement of an instinct, immediately evokes similar behaviour in those of his fellows who perceive his expressions of excitement. But we can hardly doubt that in each case the instinctive behaviour is accompanied by the appropriate emotion and felt impulse.

Sympathy of this crude kind is the cement that binds animal societies together, renders the actions of all members of a group harmonious, and allows them to reap some of the prime advantages of social life in spite of lack of intelligence.

How comes it that the instinctive behaviour of one animal directly excites similar behaviour on the part of his fellows? No satisfactory answer to this question seems to have been hitherto proposed, although this kind of behaviour has been described and discussed often enough. Not many years ago it would have seemed sufficient to answer, It is due to instinct. But that answer will hardly satisfy us to-day. I think the facts compel us to assume that in the gregarious animals each of the principal instincts has a special perceptual inlet (or recipient afferent part) that is adapted to receive and to elaborate the sense-impressions made by the expressions of the same instinct in other animals

of the same species—that, *e.g.*, the fear-instinct has, besides others, a special perceptual inlet that renders it excitable by the sound of the cry of fear, the instinct of pugnacity a perceptual inlet that renders it excitable by the sound of the roar of anger.

Human sympathy has its roots in similar specialisations of the instinctive dispositions on their afferent sides. In early childhood sympathetic emotion is almost wholly of this simple kind; and all through life most of us continue to respond in this direct fashion to the expressions of the feelings and emotions of our fellow-men. This sympathetic induction of emotion and feeling may be observed in children at an age at which they cannot be credited with understanding of the significance of the expressions that provoke their reactions. Perhaps the expression to which they respond earliest is the sound of the wailing of other children. A little later the sight of a smiling face, the expression of pleasure, provokes a smile. Later still fear, curiosity, and, I think, anger, are communicated readily in this direct fashion from one child to another. Laughter is notoriously infectious all through life, and this, though not a truly instinctive expression, affords the most familiar example of sympathetic induction of an affective state. This immediate and unrestrained responsiveness to the emotional expressions of others is one of the great charms of childhood. One may see it particularly well displayed by the children of some savage races (especially perhaps of the negro race), whom it renders wonderfully attractive.

Adults vary much in the degree to which they display these sympathetic reactions, but in few or none are they wholly lacking. A merry face makes us feel brighter; a melancholy face may cast a gloom over a cheerful company; when we witness the painful emotion of

others, we experience sympathetic pain; when we see others terror-stricken or hear their scream of terror, we suffer a pang of fear though we know nothing of the cause of their emotion or are indifferent to it; anger provokes anger; the curious gaze of the passer-by stirs our curiosity; and a display of tender emotion touches, as we say, a tender chord in our hearts.[1] In short, each of the great primary emotions that has its characteristic and unmistakable bodily expression seems to be capable of being excited by way of this immediate sympathetic response. If, then, the view here urged is true, we must not say, as many authors have done, that sympathy is due to an instinct, but rather that sympathy is founded upon a special adaptation of the receptive side of each of the principal instinctive dispositions, an adaptation that renders each instinct capable of being excited on the perception of the bodily expressions of the excitement of the same instinct in other persons.

It has been pointed out on a previous page that this primitive sympathy implies none of the higher moral qualities. There are persons who are exquisitively sympathetic in this sense of feeling with another, experi-

[1] Shortly after writing these lines I was holding a child in my arms, looking out of window on a dark night. There came a blinding flash of lightning and, after some seconds, a crash of thunder. The child was pleased by the lightning, but at the first crack of thunder she screamed in terror; immediately upon hearing the scream, I experienced, during a fraction of a second, a pang of fear that could not have been more horrible had I been threatened with all the terrors of hell. I am not at all disturbed by thunder when alone. This incident illustrates very well two points—first the sympathetic induction of emotion by immediate instinctive reaction to the expression of emotion by another; secondly, the specific character of loud noises as excitants of fear. Regarded as merely a sensory stimulus, the flash of lightning was far more violent than the thunder; yet it provoked no fear in the child.

encing distress at the sight of pain and grief, pleasure at the sight of joy, who yet are utterly selfish and are not moved in the least degree to relieve the distress they observe in others or to promote the pleasure that is reflected in themselves. Their sympathetic sensibility merely leads them to avoid all contact with distressful persons, books, or scenes, and to seek the company of the careless and the gay. And a too great sensibility of this kind is even adverse to the higher kind of conduct that seeks to relieve pain and to promote happiness; for the sufferer's expressions of pain may induce so lively a distress in the onlooker as to incapacitate him for giving help. Thus in any case of personal accident, or where surgical procedure is necessary, many a woman is rendered quite useless by her sympathetic distress.[1]

### *Suggestion and Suggestibility*

"Suggestion" is a word that has been taken over from popular speech and been specialised for psychological use. But even among psychologists it has been used in two rather different senses. A generation ago it was used in a sense very similar to that which it has in common speech; one idea was said to suggest another. But this purpose is adequately served by the word "reproduction," and there is a growing tendency to use "suggestion" only in a still more technical and strict manner, and it is in this stricter sense that it is used in these pages. Psychologists have only in recent years begun to realise the vast scope and importance of suggestion and suggestibility in social life. Their attention was directed to the study of suggestion by the recognition that the

[1] This is very noticeable in the case of vomiting. A tender mother will sometimes turn away from a vomiting child with an irresistible impulse of repulsion.

phenomena of hypnotism, so long disputed and derided, are genuine expressions of a peculiar abnormal condition of the mind, and that the leading symptom of this condition of hypnosis is the patient's extreme liability to accept with conviction any proposition submitted to him. This peculiar condition was called one of suggestibility, and the process of communication between agent and patient which leads to the latter's acceptance of any proposition was called suggestion. There was for some time a tendency to regard suggestibility as necessarily an abnormal condition and suggestion as a psychological curiosity. But very quickly it was seen that there are many degrees of suggestibility, ranging from the slight degree of the normal educated adult to the extreme degree of the deeply hypnotised subject, and that suggestion is a process constantly at work among us, the understanding of which is of extreme importance for the social sciences.

It is difficult to find a definition of suggestion which will include all varieties and will yet mark it off clearly from other processes of communication; and there is no sharp line to be drawn, for in many processes by which conviction is produced there is a more or less strong element of suggestion co-operating with logical processes. The following definition will, I think, cover all varieties: *Suggestion is a process of communication resulting in the acceptance with conviction of the communicated proposition in the absence of logically adequate grounds for its acceptance.* The measure of the suggestibility of any subject is, then, the readiness with which he thus accepts propositions. Of course, the proposition is not necessarily communicated in formal language, it may be implied by a mere gesture or interjection. The suggestibility of any subject is not of the same degree at all times; it varies not only according to the topic and according to the source from which the proposition is

communicated, but also with the condition of the subject's brain from hour to hour. The least degree of suggestibility is that of a wide-awake, self-reliant man of settled convictions, possessing a large store of systematically organised knowledge which he habitually brings to bear in criticism of all statements made to him. Greater degrees of suggestibility are due in the main to conditions of four kinds—(1) abnormal states of the brain, of which the relative dissociation obtaining in hysteria, hypnosis, normal sleep, and fatigue, is the most important; (2) deficiency of knowledge or convictions relating to the topic in regard to which the suggestion is made, and imperfect organisation of knowledge; (3) the impressive character of the source from which the suggested proposition is communicated; (4) peculiarities of the character and native disposition of the subject.

Of these the first need not engage our attention, as it has but little part in normal social life. The operation of the other three conditions may be illustrated by an example. Suppose a man of wide scientific culture to be confronted with the proposition that the bodies of the dead will one day rise from their graves to live a new life. He does not accept it, because he knows that dead bodies buried in graves undergo a rapid and complete decomposition, and because the acceptance of the proposition would involve a shattering of the whole of his strongly and systematically organised knowledge of natural processes. But the same proposition may be readily accepted by a child or a savage for lack of any system of critical belief and knowledge that would conflict with it. Such persons may accept almost any extravagant proposition with primitive credulity. But, for the great majority of civilised adults of little scientific culture, the acceptance or rejection of the proposition will depend upon the third and fourth of the

conditions enumerated above. Even a young child or a savage may reject such a proposition with scorn if it is made to him by one of his fellows; but, if the statement is solemnly affirmed by a recognised and honoured teacher, supported by all the prestige and authority of an ancient and powerful Church, not only children and savages, but most civilised adults, will accept it, in spite of a certain opposition offered by other beliefs and knowledge that they possess. Suggestion mainly dependent for its success on this condition may be called *prestige suggestion*.

But not all persons of equal knowledge and culture are equally open to prestige suggestion. Here the fourth factor comes into play, namely, character and native disposition. As regards the latter the most important condition determining individual suggestibility seems to be the relative strengths of the two instincts that were discussed in Chapter III. under the names "instincts of self-assertion" and "subjection." Personal contact with any of our fellows seems regularly to bring one or other, or both, of these two instincts into play. The presence of persons whom we regard as our inferiors in the particular situation of the moment evokes the impulse of self-assertion; towards such persons we are but little or not at all suggestible. But, in the presence of persons who make upon us an impression of power or of superiority of any kind, whether merely of size or physical strength, or of social standing, or of intellectual reputation, or, perhaps, even of tailoring, the impulse of submission is brought into play, and we are thrown into a submissive, receptive attitude towards them; or, if the two impulses are simultaneously evoked, there takes place a painful struggle between them and we suffer the complex emotional disturbance known as bashful feeling.[1] In so far

[1] See p. 146, for bashfulness.

as the impulse of submission predominates we are suggestible towards the person whose presence evokes it. Persons in whom this instinct is relatively strong will, other things being the same, be much subject to prestige suggestion; while, on the other hand, persons in whom this impulse is weak and the opposed instinct of self-assertion is strong will be apt to be self-confident, "cocksure" persons, and to be but little subject to prestige suggestion. In the course of character-formation by social intercourse, excessive strength of either of these impulses may be rectified or compensated to some extent; the able, but innately submissive, man may gain a reasonable confidence; the man of self-assertive disposition may, if not stupid, learn to recognise his own weaknesses; and in so far as these compensations are effected liability to prestige suggestion will be diminished or increased.

Children are, then, inevitably suggestible, firstly, because of their lack of knowledge and lack of systematic organisation of such knowledge as they have; secondly, because the superior size, strength, knowledge, and reputation of their elders tend to evoke the impulse of submission and to throw them into the receptive attitude. And it is in virtue largely of their suggestibility that they so rapidly absorb the knowledge, beliefs, and especially the sentiments, of their social environment. But most adults also remain suggestible, especially towards mass-suggestion and towards the propositions which they know to be supported by the whole weight of society or by a long tradition. To the consideration of the social importance of suggestion we must return in a later chapter.

This brief discussion may be concluded by the repudiation of a certain peculiar implication attached to the word "suggestion" by some writers. They

speak of "suggestive ideas" and of ideas working suggestively in the mind, implying that such ideas and such working have some peculiar potency, a potency that would seem to be almost of a magical character; but they do not succeed in making clear in what way these ideas and their operations differ from others. The potency of the idea conveyed by suggestion seems to be nothing but the potency of conviction; and convictions produced by logical methods seem to have no less power to determine thought and action, or even to influence the vital processes, than those produced by suggestion; the principal difference is that by suggestion conviction may be produced in regard to propositions that are insusceptible of logical demonstration, or even are opposed to the evidence of perception and inference.

A few words must be said about *contra-suggestion*. By this word it is usual to denote the mode of action of one individual on another which results in the second accepting, in the absence of adequate logical grounds, the contrary of the proposition asserted or implied by the agent. There are persons with whom this result is very liable to be produced by any attempt to exert suggestive influence, or even by the most ordinary and casual utterance. One remarks to such a person that it is a fine day, and, though, up to that moment, he may have formulated no opinion about the weather, and have been quite indifferent to it, he at once replies, "Well, I don't agree with you. I think it is perfectly horrid weather." Or one says to him, "I think you ought to take a holiday," and, though he had himself contemplated this course, he replies, "No, I don't need one," and becomes more immovably fixed in this opinion and the corresponding course of action the more he is urged to adopt their opposites. Some children display this contra-suggestibility very strongly for a period and

afterwards return to a normal degree of suggestibility. But in some persons it becomes habitual or chronic; they take a pride in doing and saying nothing like other people, in dressing and eating differently, in defying all the minor social conventions. Commonly, I believe, such persons regard themselves as displaying great strength of character and cherish their peculiarity. In such cases the permanence of the attitude may have very complex mental causes; but in its simpler instances, and probably at its inception in all instances, contra-suggestion seems to be determined by the undue dominance of the impulse of self-assertion over that of submission, owing to the formation of some rudimentary sentiment of dislike for personal influence resulting from an unwise exercise of it—a sentiment which may have for its object the influence of some one person or personal influence in general.

### *Imitation*

This word has been used by M. Tarde in his well-known sociological treatises to cover processes of sympathy and suggestion as well as the processes to which the name is more usually applied, and, since the verb "to suggest" can be applied only to the part of the agent in the process of suggestion, and since we need some verb to describe the part of the patient, it is perhaps legitimate to extend the meaning of the word "imitate" in this way, so as to make it cover the process of accepting a suggestion.

But in the more strict sense of the word "imitation," it is applicable only to the imitation or copying by one individual of the actions, the bodily movements, of another. Imitation and imitativeness in this narrower sense of the words are usually ascribed to an instinct.

Thus James writes: "This sort of imitativeness is possessed by man in common with other gregarious animals, and is an instinct in the fullest sense of the term."[1] Baldwin also uses the phrase "instinct of imitation" and its equivalents,[2] but applies the word "imitation" to so great a variety of processes that it can hardly be supposed he means to attribute all of them to the operation of this assumed instinct.

The reasons for refusing to recognise an instinct of imitation may be stated as follows :—Imitative actions are extremely varied, for every kind of action may be imitated; there is therefore nothing specific in the nature of the imitative movements and in the nature of the sense-impressions by which the movements are excited or guided. And this variety of movement and of sense-impression is not due to complication of a congenital disposition, such as takes place in the case of all the true instincts; for this variety characterises imitative movements from the outset. More important is the fact that, underlying the varieties of imitative action, there is no common affective state and no common impulse seeking satisfaction in some particular change of state. And we have seen reason to regard such a specific impulse, prompting to continued action until its satisfaction is secured, as the most essential feature of every truly instinctive process. Further, if we consider the principal varieties of imitative action, we find that all are explicable without the assumption of a special instinct of imitation. Imitative actions of at least three, perhaps of five, distinct classes may be distinguished, according to the kind of mental process of which they are the outcome.

[1] "Principles of Psychology," vol. ii., p. 408.

[2] "Mental Development, Methods and Processes," 3rd ed., p. 281. New York, 1906.

1. The expressive actions that are sympathetically excited in the way discussed under the head of "sympathy" form one class of imitative actions. Thus, when a child responds to a smile with a smile, when he cries on hearing another child cry, or when he runs to hide himself on seeing other children running frightened to shelter, he may be said to be imitating the actions of others. If we were right in our conclusions regarding the responses of primitive sympathy, these outwardly imitative actions are instinctive, and are due, not to an instinct of imitation, but to special adaptations of the principal instinctive dispositions on their sensory sides, and they are secondary to the sympathetic induction of the emotions and feelings they express. Imitative actions of this sort are displayed by all the gregarious animals, and they are the only kind of which most of the animals seem capable. They are displayed on a great scale by crowds of human beings and are the principal source of the wild excesses of which crowds are so often guilty.

2. Imitative actions of a second class are simple ideo-motor actions. The clearest examples are afforded by subjects in hypnosis and in certain other abnormal conditions. Many hypnotised subjects will, if their attention is forcibly drawn to the movements of the hypnotiser, imitate his every action. A certain proportion of the people of the Malay race are afflicted with a disorder known as *lâtah*,[1] which renders them liable to behave like the hypnotic subject in this respect. And all of us, if our attention is keenly concentrated on the movements of another person, are apt to make, at least in a partial incipient fashion,

[1] An excellent account of this peculiar affliction may be found in Mr. Hugh Clifford's "Studies in Brown Humanity," as also in Sir F. A. Swettenham's "Malay Sketches."

every movement we observe—*e.g.*, on watching a difficult stroke in billiards, the balancing of a tight-rope walker, the rhythmic swaying of a dancer. In all these cases the imitative movement seems to be due to the fact that the visual presentation of the movement of another is apt to evoke the representation of a similar movement of one's own body, which, like all motor representations, tends to realise itself immediately in movement. Many of the imitative movements of children are of this class. Some person attracts a child's curious attention, by reason perhaps of some unfamiliar trait; the child becomes absorbed in watching him and presently imitates his movements. It seems to be in virtue of this simple ideo-motor imitation that a child so easily picks up, as we say, the peculiarities of gesture, and the facial expressions and deportment generally, of those among whom he lives. This kind of imitation may be in part voluntary and so merges into a third kind—deliberate, voluntary, or self-conscious imitation.

3. Some person, or some kind of skilled action, excites our admiration, and we take the admired person for our model in all things or deliberately set ourselves to imitate the action.

Between the second and third kinds is a fourth kind of imitation allied to both, and affording for the child a transition from the one to the other. In cases of this fourth type the imitator, a child say, observes a certain action, and his attention is concentrated, not on the movements, but on the effects produced by the movements. When the child again finds himself in a situation similar to that of the person he has observed, the idea of the effect observed comes back to mind and perhaps leads directly to action. For example, a child observes an elder person throw a piece of paper on the fire; then, when on a later occasion the child finds himself in the

presence of fire and paper, he is very apt to imitate the action; he produces a similar effect, though he may do so by means of a very different combination of movements. This kind of imitation is perhaps in many cases to be regarded as simple ideo-motor action due to the tendency of the idea to realise itself in action; but in other cases various impulses may be operative.

For the sake of completeness a fifth kind of imitation may be mentioned. It is the imitation by very young children of movements that are not expressive of feeling or emotion; it is manifested at an age when the child cannot be credited with ideas of movement or with deliberate self-conscious imitation. A few instances of this sort have been reported by reliable observers; *e.g.*, Preyer[1] stated that his child imitated the protrusion of his lips when in the fourth month of life. These cases have been regarded, by those who have not themselves witnessed similar actions, as chance coincidences, because it is impossible to bring them under any recognised type of imitation. I have, however, carefully verified the occurrence of this sort of imitation in two of my own children; one of them on several occasions during his fourth month repeatedly put out his tongue when the person whose face he was watching made this movement. For the explanation of any such simple imitation of a particular movement at this early age, we have to assume the existence of a very simple perceptual disposition having this specific motor tendency, and, since we cannot suppose such a disposition to have been acquired at this age, we are compelled to suppose it to be innately organised. Such an innate disposition would be an extremely simple rudimentary instinct. It may be that every child inherits a considerable number of such rudimentary instincts, and that they play a considerable

[1] "Die Seele des Kindes," 5te Auflage, Leipzig, 1900, S. 180.