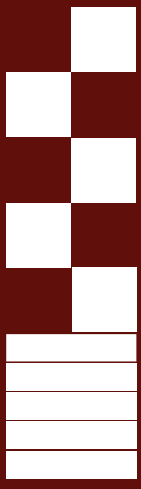
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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Contents

CHAPTER TWENTY

Principles of Sociology (1928)

Frederick Elmore Lumley

New York: McGraw-Hill, pp. 220–27 [with elisions].

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Frederick Lumley (1880–1954) was among the first wave of scholars to study the social role of radio, publishing several journal articles on the nature of the radio audience and the use of the new medium in education. With a PhD from Yale (1912), he joined the faculty at The Ohio State University in 1920 and rose to chair of the Department of Sociology in 1932, retiring in 1945.

In addition to radio, Lumley had a strong and related interest in propaganda, expressed in his books *Means of Social Control* (1925) and *The Propaganda Menace* (1933). There he warned, "We have now come to recognize that wherever there is any sort of connection between individuals, there the propagandists flock to pour in their poison" (192). Propaganda is treated more fully in the next section of this anthology, but Lumley's work is a reminder here that throughout the 1920s and 1930s, writing on suggestion theory, in both the academic and popular press, was usually bound up to a greater or lesser extent in discussions of the media's capacity to create and alter the public consciousness.

In his 1928 survey text, excerpted below, Lumley reviews by then well-trod ground, laying out for the student the definitions, categories, and conditions of suggestion, as well as imitation, and citing many of the figures already sketched here: Baldwin, Bechterew, Judd, Ellwood, and Bernard.

He offers examples of suggestion-based manipulation along the way, stating that "an increasing amount comes from books and magazines and especially the newspapers and the movies. These tell us more and more what to think and what to do and how to feel." In many ways, his analysis is a glum one. He describes "the vast numbers" who for various reasons make up "the suggestible part of the population," adding, moreover, that "none of us is free; we always have some weak point or several weak points by which we may be taken captive." Lumley was not totally without hope, however. While not included in this excerpt, in other work he expresses the Progressive's faith in the prophylactic of education to provide adequate protection against "The Propaganda Menace."—*P.P.*

References

Lumley, Frederick. 1925. *Means of Social Control*. New York: Century.

Lumley, Frederick. 1933. *The Propaganda Menace*. New York: Century.

Principles of Sociology (1928)

CHAPTER XI: SUGGESTION-IMITATION

We are still considering major social processes, social interactions, characteristic "goings-on"; these are the plots of the social drama which interest us now. The next social process selected for treatment is a double affair, a social Siamese twins. We can hardly think of imitation without at the same time thinking of what is imitated—which leads directly to suggestion—and we can hardly think of suggestion without thinking of what comes out of it—which leads often to imitation. In this chapter, then, we have to deal with a more obviously circular form of interaction—the activities of people forming a continuous hail of suggestions, these being taken up by others who act imitatively and suggest to yet others, and so on without end. [...]

SUGGESTION

1. Definition

Suggestion has been defined in various ways. Bechterew describes it as "the direct infection of one person by another of certain mental states" or "the penetration or inoculation of a strange idea into the consciousness, without direct immediate participation by the 'ego' of the subject." This is passive suggestion. But there is also active suggestion wherein the subject necessarily takes part by attention, reflection, judgment, and will. These two phases of the process are obvious to all of us, for while we are actively attending in one direction, we are at the same time open to impressions from other directions, and thus active and passive at the same time; we may be intent upon the book we are reading—direct suggestion—but become vaguely aware that we have been called to do something about paying our overdue taxes—indirect suggestion. Our environment is continually furnishing us with hints, noted and unnoted, for our next or for future movements.[1]

"By suggestion" says Ellwood, "we mean the process of communicating an idea from one individual to another, when the idea is accepted more or less uncritically or without rational ground."[2] According to Allport, suggestion may be regarded from three points of view and thus defined in three ways. First it is a process of building up predispositions toward behavior in certain ways. We might think of these predispositions as being organized around the native drives or urges such as hunger, sex impulses, fear, and the like; and we can also think of them as being organized about and enlargements of certain acquired patterns, such as habits of action and belief—religious, political, aesthetic, and others. Looked at in this way, suggestion is the process of forming attitudes or prejudices; the emphasis here is upon what takes place within the subject; it is suggestibility.

In the second place, suggestion may be regarded as some external signal or stimulus which releases or sets off predispositions already built up. When we are already very fond of pie or detest it, attracted to foreigners or abominate them, emotionally aroused by the flag or untouched, deeply in love with some one or antipathetic;—these are predispositions which are easily touched off. This is what we mean when we say that a person is "quick on the trigger"; we mean that he is like gunpowder—ready to "go up in the air"

[1] Cf. Park and Burgess, op. cit., p. 410.

[2] "The Psychology of Human Society," p. 347.

or, like a turtle "sink into his shell" at the mere mention of a certain matter; we mean the cue that touches off our readiness to respond in certain ways.

In the third place, suggestion may be defined as that process by which these predispositions are augmented or intensified. Thus, if we are fond of pie, we may be made to be more fond of it by certain acts or words of others; or we may be made to detest it. If we dislike foreigners, we may be made to hate them by the suggestions of others. We find that advertisers and propagandists are all the while working to enlarge our predispositions in certain directions and dwarf them in others.

It will be evident that these three views are all important for a well-rounded view of the subject. It will also be apparent that the first and the third views are similar, the latter referring to an advanced stage of the process indicated by the former. It will also be obvious that the second view is the more common one. This view stresses the fundamental characteristics, namely, the strength of the predispositions, the immediacy and automaticity of the responses.[3]

2. Suggestibility

These points but confirm our own observation that, in certain ways and upon certain matters, we are all very impressionable; we are very suggestible; we are "quick on the trigger" when certain hints are given but are left cold by others; we "go up in the air" when some matters are mentioned but are quite indifferent to others; and we vary in suggestibility. Why is this? What are the reasons why some stimuli affect us always and others do not or why the same stimuli affect us differently at different times? In other words, we come now to inquire briefly into the nature and causes of suggestibility. We might consider first the internal conditions and second the external conditions.

1. Internal Conditions.—The first part of the answer to the question of our impressionability is found in our *predispositions*, native and acquired; it is found in the response mechanisms present at the moment. Illustrations are abundant and at hand. If we already fear Catholics, then we are very sensitive to hints from the Klan; fearing, we are already getting away from Catholics as quickly as possible, and hints from the Klan but help us in our flight; or, fearing them, we are ready to believe that they are planning to dominate the country, and cues from the Klan but nerve us to fight them the more viciously. Thus, the Klan works with a set-up which we already have, either to set it off or to strengthen it. If we need or believe we need a

[3] Cf. Bernard, "Introduction to Social Psychology," p. 284.

new suit of clothes or a new dress, then we are especially attentive to the announcements of the advertisers about bargain sales and the new fashions; our wants are a weakness into which these manipulators put their verbal and pictorial hooks; our needs are systemic conditions which are ready for inoculation. If we are Republicans, then we are especially susceptible to favorable remarks about Republicans and are ready to believe terrible things about Democrats. If we are laborers and members of unions, then we are impressionable to hints against capitalists. Thus, our suggestibility is partly a matter of our training, our moulding, up to date; it is partly a matter of our mental structure and how we have been in the habit of responding. Since we all have prejudices, we are all susceptible; since we are all brought up in groups with certain folkways and mores dominant, we all have prejudices.

Again, we are suggestible in proportion to the *absence of inhibiting* or competing set-ups. This is but the negative aspect of the situation described above which might be regarded as positive; it is equivalent to saying that while we are strongly conditioned in certain directions and upon certain matters, we are unprotected and weak at others. For instance, if we are drinkers, we are impressionable to stimuli from liquors, liquor bottles, the clink of glasses, the smell of a barroom, conversation about drinking, and the like—unless we have made a New Year's resolution or pledged ourselves to the temperance society to quit drinking; this acts as an inhibiting factor to these suggestions. If we are fond of football or the theater, then the preparations of others about us to go to the game or the show, their conversation, their enthusiasm are suggestions which we find it hard to resist unless we have determined to study or to do something else.

Says Bernard:

> The unfilled mind operates as a favorable factor in suggestibility in a great many types of cases. But it can thus operate only if there are certain behavior mechanisms in the mind which are effectively conditioned to stimuli. This condition is likely always to exist, even in those of the lowest intelligence quotient or with the least training.[4]

The animals below man are highly suggestible in the direction of their instinctive and simple acquired interests or needs. Feeble-minded persons, like the lower animals, are highly suggestible in the same way and thus find it impossible to meet the highly developed and complicated restraints of ordinary social life. The young, like the feeble-minded and the lower animals,

[4] "Introduction to Social Psychology," p. 305.

are highly suggestible in the direction of their relatively few preconditioned responses. They can build up, however, many conditioned responses whereas the feeble-minded and the animals cannot do so. The uneducated and the inexperienced are like children with respect to suggestibility. The same is true of the so-called backward races. Men and women of culture are also very impressionable to the suggestions of skilled manipulators in those fields in which they lack experience or other rational inhibitions; the most careful scientists are often sold "gold bricks" by high-powered salesmen.

Many *mental diseases*, such as hysteria, functional amnesia, absent-mindedness, dual personality, and the like are very favorable to suggestibility in some directions. During great emotional stress, one is usually more suggestible—at the time of a death in the family, for instance. Fatigue, fasting, and intoxication make us all more susceptible. These interfere with the nerve pulsations, cause the weaker, because acquired, reactions to cease functioning, and the individual is given over to the control of the older and stronger impulses. Thus, the tired person or the one who has fasted some time is usually more irritable and less reasonable than the one who has not poisoned the tissues in these ways. It is under such conditions as these that excellent and sensible people often do the most fiendish things.

We might also speak of the presence of *fixed ideas*, manias, and various fears as heightening suggestibility in line with these outgoings. There are all degrees of intensity here, from the mild peculiarities, foibles, hobbies, up to and including the wildest insanities. To sum up, we have, then, among us and everywhere vast numbers of biased people, empty minds, sick minds, children, absorbed folk, who constitute the suggestible part of the population; and, indeed, none of us is free; we always have some weak point or several weak points by which we may be taken captive.

2. External Conditions.—What takes us captive? The answer is, very naturally, the stimuli which impinge upon us from without. Suggestions reach us from many parts of our world; but we are interested in the suggestions which reach us from other people, from the members of our own species. Then, of course, wherever there are people in action, there are suggestions. This leads at once into the problem of imitation; but there are several points to be made before we take up that matter.

Monotony and rhythm in the stimuli reaching us are important factors in aiding these stimuli to do their work. If the teacher talks in a monotonous tone, we either become fixed upon it, as it were, or we utterly lose interest and go to sleep or do something else. The rhythm of the music and the dance

take us in almost invariably—unless we are righteously opposed to dancing and dance music, which is inhibition. We seem to be very susceptible to stimuli in these forms in our work, in recreation, in worship, and elsewhere.

Very important, also, are the *duration and repetition* of the stimuli. The criminal who is stolid and unyielding finally breaks down and confesses when put through the "third degree," which is almost the severest ordeal any man has to go through. In the evangelistic meeting, the perpetual reiteration of the same theme finally weakens the sin-ridden and gains the results sought; as the result of high pressure for a time, some begin to surrender, then more, and, finally, droves respond. In a certain hymn, the idea "where He leads me I will follow" is repeated three times in the chorus, and the chorus is sung with each stanza, so the singers say this phrase a *dozen* times. Again:

— It's the old time religion,
It's the old time religion,
It's the old time religion,
And it's good enough for me.

This same thing is found in advertising, no one being able to go out any more without being assailed at every available point by glowing descriptions of numerous commodities.

A closely allied feature is the *volume* of stimuli. This is well illustrated again from advertising. Indeed, we might truly say that duration and repetition constitute volume. Volume of stimuli cuts off other pressures by outdoing them and thus leaves a clear field for the particular pressures applied. There is no particular reason why we should chew A's gum more than B's except that we see it advertised more frequently, more sumptuously. If we have been continually plied with the idea that our soul is lost, then we are apt to save it or have it saved according to the pattern prescribed by those who have been most persistent in helping us reach the fixed idea that it is lost.

That undefinable but real thing which we call *prestige* also has its weight. The factors composing it are numerous and various, but some of them are old age, special skill, high position, erudition, or superiority of some kind. The Bible has immense prestige with many because it is a very old book and is supposed to be inspired. When the makers of a certain cigarette recently plied us all with the idea that great singers and public speakers were testifying that this particular brand of "coffin nails" did not hurt but actually improved their voices, they were using prestige. When some one clinches an

argument with the assertion that some great author, banker, military leader, statesman, or scientist did this or said that, he is using prestige; and we find it very difficult to resist such an argument; we tend to respond promptly and automatically. We are "charmed," or "hypnotized," or "fascinated" by the big, the overpowering, the superior.[5]

3. The Ubiquitousness of Suggestion

According to Bernard:

> Suggestion operates in almost every sphere and aspect of life. It is a short cut method of controlling effectively conditioned behavior. It is in itself quite devoid of moral character and may be used indifferently for ethical, non-ethical, or anti-ethical ends. It is frequently said that rationally directed conduct is of a higher type socially than suggested behavior. This is of course true, but it is not possible to be self or socially conscious about everything. Short cut controls in behavior are inevitable.[6]

The greater volume of stimuli reaches us from our immediate surroundings—the home, the school, the playground, the local clubs, in short, the primary groups. But an increasing amount comes from books and magazines and especially the newspapers and the movies. These tell us more and more what to think and what to do and how to feel. These things "make up our minds" for us all along the line. We think we are acting of our own accord and in the light of our own judgment, when, as a matter of fact, this is almost impossible considering the amount of pressure, the strength of it, and the ubiquitousness of it.

Besides that inevitable pressure which we cannot escape simply because we live among people with these developed means of communication, there is a vast amount of special interest manipulation. Having nothing to meet but the pressures applied by the members of our families, our friends, and the like makes the problem of individual decision tremendously difficult; but when we have sharpshooters of skillfully directed stimuli all about us trying to impregnate us with their own special charges, and when we rarely can know who they are, where they are, or how they work, the problem is immeasurably complicated. The advertisers are bad enough, but the propagandists are worse. According to these, we must always be doing

[5] Cf. Bogardus, "Fundamentals of Social Psychology," p. 124.

[6] *Op. cit.*, p. 320.

something different from what we are doing. We do find some relief in the struggles which they have among themselves to outdo each other in getting our attention. But, in spite of this, the pressure they apply is terrific. We are everlastingly watched. The Evil Eye of primitive man was no more potent for direction than the pressures which modern experts use. But now we are ready to consider imitation.

IMITATION

1. Some Definitions

According to Judd, imitation is used to "designate any repetition of any act or thought which has been noted by an observer. Thus one imitates the facial expression of another or his mode of speech."[7] The conception is narrowed by Kirkpatrick:

> In general, we think of acts as imitative when they reproduce acts that have been observed by the performer. The psychological basis of imitation is the general tendency of the idea of an action to result in the action. In imitation the idea of the act comes more or less directly from the perception of the act as performed by another. It is imitative just in proportion as the idea and the impulse are derived from the perception of the act.

He points out that if a hungry child begins eating when he sees some one else eating, the act is not properly imitative, since the child knows how to eat and is hungry; it would eat at the sight of food. But when it tries to eat *like* someone else or eats when it is not hungry because it sees some one else eating—that is imitation.[8]

The term is broadened again by Baldwin who uses the notion to cover the kinds of actions already noted and, in addition, repetitions of actions of the imitator himself. Thus, one imitates oneself and sets up what is called *circular reaction*. Stout points out that we must carefully distinguish between the ability to imitate and the impulse to imitate. We might take again the case of the child eating. It knows how to get food to its mouth—that is its ability. But its impulse to eat may be set off by the sight of food or by somebody else trying to eat; this latter would be imitation if the child were not hungry. When the cough of one man sets another man coughing, it is evident that

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[7] Park and Burgess, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

[8] "Fundamentals of Child Study," p. 129.

imitation here applies only to the impulse to cough; the second man does not learn how to cough from the first man; he is simply prompted to cough at this time by the coughing of the other man.[9]

Bernard says:

> Imitation is the doing what the other person does because perception of his behavior sets up in the imitator the same or similar responses to those which serve as stimuli. The imitated behavior may be either a total overt response or symbolic behavior. It is not possible to imitate or copy the behavior of another unless that behavior has been conditioned as a response organization in the imitator to the behavior of the one imitated, or of some one behaving as he does, as stimulus . . . Thus imitation is a social category within the field of the conditioned response.

2. Kinds of Imitation

Two types and four subtypes of imitation are distinguished by Bernard. These are suggestion imitation—automatic and accidental, and purposive—by trial and error and projection. We must understand what these things mean.

1. Suggestion Imitation.—*a.* There is first of all that sort of imitation which we might call *automatic*. We go to the tap and turn it, and the water runs out. Similarly, we act on people. We say to a person: "You are a liar." That speech is a turning of the tap or a pulling of the trigger—whichever simile seems the more appropriate. The point is that there is something ready to come forth—of itself, automatically—and we simply occasion the coming. We do not force it out; we simply make its coming possible.

Conditioned as we all are to react to certain stimuli, we are ready to be angry at such a speech, we are ready to lift our hats when we see others doing so, we are ready to run when we see others running, we are hungry when we see others eating, we are ready to get in step on the sidewalk when we are walking with others, we are ready to beat time with our foot, we are ready to yawn when we see others yawn. We do these things automatically, without taking thought, without our being aware what we are doing. And we have already pointed out that there are many copies about, many cues to follow, many hints to take, many stimuli plying us all the time.

[9] Park and Burgess, *op. cit.*, p. 390.