Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine
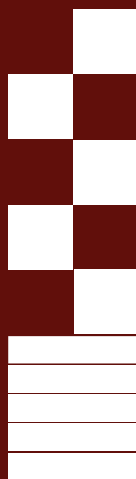
Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons

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PART THREE: APPLICATIONS

"The Need for Social Psychology" (1927)

John Dewey

Psychological Review *24: pp. 266–72.*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

John Dewey (1859–1952), was one of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century, a philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer with a boundless faith in the public's capacity for democratic self-governance. He helped shape early pragmatism and was a leading voice in the Progressive movement. Starting his academic career at the University of Michigan, he later moved to the University of Chicago and then to Columbia. In 1899 he was elected president of the American Psychological Association and seventeen years later gave an address before the meeting of the twenty-fifth anniversary of that organization, from which the following excerpt is taken.

His address speaks to a paradigmatic turning point in social psychology. Dewey directs his comments to the discipline's recent past and what he saw as the exciting theoretical evolution being brought about by the emergence of new models. The past, in this case, was embodied in the work of French crowd theory. Dewey noted the dominance of that perspective through the turn of the twentieth century and, for him at least, the paucity of the intellectual argument it represented. "For more than a decade [Tarde's] work and that of his followers in France and in the United States—among whom we may cite

in diverse directions Baldwin and Ross—dominated social psychology and almost sociology." But it was time, he declared, to recall "social psychology from the wrong track in which the Imitation and Suggestibility schools had set it going." The problem, for Dewey, was an indefensible separation of the individual from the social and the postulation of a "mythical" crowd mind.

The future, he believed, belonged to the emerging theories of instinct, of which he was especially fond, and behaviorism, along with objective methods based on quantitative analysis. He pointed in particular to the work of McDougall and Thorndike as examples of "the next great force in social psychology." And he saw great promise in the application of statistical analysis to social problems, lauding Condorcet's then-recently introduced science of probabilities, which Dewey described as "fraught with infinite potentiality for control of social progress."

Dewey was not alone in his criticism of crowd theory, which was in fact being displaced during this period by instinct theory and behaviorism. What he did not foresee, however, was the tenacity of the concepts of suggestion and imitation set apart from the broader French social thinking. It turned out that suggestion and imitation, as specific psychological processes, could be cleanly extracted from their European social moorings and neatly inserted into the new US models.

The following section considers the evolution of suggestion, as it migrated into the dominant paradigms of social psychology in the early decades of the new century.—*P.P.*

"The Need for Social Psychology" (1917)

On the surface it is just coincidence that the foundation of this association and the publication of the 'Principles of Psychology' of William James were so nearly contemporaneous, their respective dates being, as you know, 1891 and 1890**.** In view, however, of the depth and breadth of the influence of James, we who are celebrating today our twentyfifth anniversary are at liberty, I think, to consider the coincidence as more than chronological, and to date back by one year the gestation of our association. At all events, it would be ungrateful to engage in any discussion of the past and future of social psychology without recalling the few rich pages of the 'Principles' which are devoted to the social self, and, in the discussion of instincts, to the native reactions of human beings in the presence of one another. Big books have been written since which are hardly more than an amplification of

suggestions found in these few pages. When, for example, a few years later, the *Socius* became the hero of a psychological drama, not many recalled that he had already been introduced under that very name in the pages of James.

Again it is outwardly a mere coincidence that the work of Tarde on the 'Laws of Imitation' was published in the year in which the 'Principles' saw the light of day, and that practically all of Tarde's work fell within the decade lying between 1890 and 1900. But behind the pure coincidence there was the recognition of the need for social ends of a more scientific treatment of collective human nature, and the important role of psychology in building up the new social science. While James confined himself to pregnant suggestions concerning the new forms which human experience and selfhood take on because of the presence of other human selves, Tarde attempted an ambitious interpretation of almost all facts of social organization, progress and degeneration in terms of certain rubrics to which he gave a psychological quality. For more than a decade his work and that of his followers in France and in the United States—among whom we may cite in diverse directions Baldwin and Ross—dominated social psychology and almost sociology. I shall not rehearse the old discussions about Imitation as a psychological fact and a social force. I shall assume with most of contemporary psychological critics that as a descriptive and explanatory conception it misplaced emphasis and tended to distort facts. But nevertheless we cannot minimize the immense power of this stage of social science in popularizing the idea of social psychology, and in bringing into recognition many facts, such as the importance of prestige, fashion, sensitiveness to the beliefs of others, the difficulties which innovation, no matter how reasonable, has to meet, etc., facts which are permanently imbedded in social science. Tarde himself was certainly one of the most stimulating and varied of writers, and I do not think we shall ever outgrow some of his contributions, although to my mind they are found rather in logic than in psychology—such as the necessity for reducing the gross phenomena of social life into minute events which may then be analyzed one by one. The most fruitful of his psychological conceptions was ahead of his time and went almost unnoted. It was that all psychological phenomena can be divided into the physiological and the social, and that when we have relegated elementary sensation and appetite to the former head, all that is left of our mental life, our beliefs, ideas and desires, falls within the scope of social psychology.

I hope I may find general agreement in pointing to the work of McDougall and Thorndike respectively as indicative of the next great force in social

psychology, together with such writings as those, upon the social side, of Graham Wallas. Aside from valuable contributions in detail, the significance of these contributions lies, to my mind, in recalling social psychology from the wrong track in which the Imitation and Suggestibility schools had set it going. For those schools gave the dawning science a wrong twist in carrying over into science the old popular and practical antithesis of the individual and the social, and thus setting up two independent and even contrary sciences—individual and social psychology. As a concrete illustration of the absurd results to which this antithesis led, it is perhaps sufficient to refer to those bizarre writings on the psychology of the crowd in which it was assumed that the psychology of the individual left to himself is reflective and rational, while man's emotional obsessions and irrationalities are to be accounted for by the psychology of association with others. From the root of all such aberrations we were recalled the very moment the problem was presented not as one of the relationship of a mythical psychology of an isolated individual mind to the even more mythical psychology of a mass or crowd or public mind, but as the problem of the relationship of original or native activities to acquired capacities and habits. Henceforth our social psychology is placed upon the sure ground of observation of instinctive behavior; it can develop upon the basis of fact undistorted by the requirement of meeting preconceived notions imported from without. The whole question of imitation, for example, reduces itself to one of fact: Is imitativeness one of the original tendencies of human nature. If so, what is its intensity and mode of working in conjunction with the other unlearned activities?

The popularizers of science will doubtless remain half a generation behind this as well as other scientific advances, but for those who have learned the lesson of recourse to fund mental responses, the way is opened for emancipation from the greatest foe with which social science has had to contend—which I shall take the liberty of calling the monistic. How often have we been invited to build up our social, political, and ethical explanations in terms of some single and supposedly dominant mental constituent! How often discussions and disputes have been, at bottom, only a question as to which of rival single claimants we shall yield allegiance. Instincts to power, to control of others, fear of authority, sex, love of pleasure, of ease, all have been appealed to, and explanations constructed in terms of one or another exclusively. Hence forth it is, I submit, pure wilfulness if anyone pretending to a scientific treatment starts from any other than a pluralistic basis: the complexity and specific variety of the factors of human nature, each

operating in response to its own highly specific stimulus, and each subject to almost infinite shadings and modulations as it enters into combination and competition with others. The conception of social psychology resulting from this mode of approach becomes essentially one with that set forth by Professor W. I. Thomas in his paper on the province of social psychology at the St. Louis Congress of Arts and Science in 1904. On the one hand our problem is to know the modifications wrought in the native constitution of man by the fact that the elements of his endowment operate in this or that social medium; on the other hand, we want to know how control of the environment may be better secured by means of the operation of this or that native capacity. Under these general heads are summed up the infinity of special and difficult problems relating to education on the one hand and to constructive modification of our social institutions on the other. To form a mind out of certain native instincts by selecting an environment which evokes them and directs their course; to reform social institutions by break-ing up habits and giving peculiar intensity and scope to some impulse is the problem of social control in its two phases. To describe how such changes take place is the task of social psychology stated in generalized terms.

I hope I do not need to disclaim an attempt to give in even the barest summary the history of social psychology during the past twenty-five years. My object has been quite other. I have only wanted to refer to some salients in the intellectual fortifications constructed during this period for the sake of pointing out, in equally general terms, something of what now confronts us, waiting, nay demanding, to be done. Before passing on to this point, I feel I must avert possible misunderstanding by mentioning two allied factors which have also influenced the development of which I have spoken. One is the application of statistical methods to psychological research; the other, the behavioristic movement. Neither was devised primarily in the interests of social psychology. The requirements of education have, however, been a powerful agency in promoting the former, while education presents, of course, one phase of the problem of social control. Speaking more broadly, social phenomena are of a kind which demand statistical mathematics rather than the type of mathematics which has been evolved especially for use in dealing with physical facts. Condorcet's great essay on 'The Progress of the Human Mind' forecasts a future in which human arrangements would be regulated by science. In dealing with the influence of mathematical science he points to the newly developing theory of probabilities as that branch of mathematics which is fraught with infinite potentiality for control of social

progress. I think it is only fair to see in statistical psychology a step forward, short and halting though it be for the immediate present, in the realization of Condorcet's prophecy.

The behavioristic movement inevitably tends to confirm the tendency of which I have already spoken in connection with the writings of James, McDougall, and Thorndike. It transfers attention from vague generalities regarding social consciousness and social mind to the specific processes of interaction which take place among human beings, and to the details of group-behavior. It emphasizes the importance of knowledge of the primary activities of human nature, and of the modifications and reorganizations they undergo in association with the activities of others. It radically simplifies the whole problem by making it clear that social institutions and arrangements, including the whole apparatus of tradition and transmission, represent simply the acquired transformations of original human endowments.

This provides the possibility of a positive method for analyzing social phenomena. I shall avoid engaging in passing in the disputed question of the value of an introspective psychology. But it seems almost self-evident that even if introspection were a valid method in individual psychology, so called, it could not be of use in the investigation of social facts, even though those facts be labelled social mind or consciousness. Yet one has only to look at the writings of the Austrian and German school of "folk-psychologists" (say of Wundt, obviously the most important) to see how this treatment has been affected by an assumed need of making the method and results of social psychology conform to the received categories of introspective psychology. From such deforming of facts the behavioristic outlook immediately redeems us; it represents not an improvement in detail but a different mode of attack. It is not as yet possible to estimate the significance of this alteration. In my opinion, however, the chief cause of the backwardness of social psychology has resided in the artificiality of the endeavor to adapt the rubrics of introspective psychology to the facts of objective associated life. The opening of another road of approach may therefore be expected to emancipate inquiry.

I thus come to the explicit statement of the purpose of my reminiscent sketch. The aim was to justify the presentation of the conviction that the quarter century in which this Association has existed marks just the emancipation of social psychology from influences which prevented its development on its own feet and its own merits, while the work done on lines which (as it seems to me) must be abandoned, have nevertheless done the great service of enforcing the vast field open to a social psychology, and the

great need it has to serve. I turn accordingly from the past to the future, or if *you* will from prophecy taking the guise of history to prophecy frankly avowing itself as such.

I foresee, then, a great reflex wave from social psychology back into general psychology. An important conclusion in the psychology of native activities does not seem to have been drawn as yet by those who would base a scientific psychology upon this foundation. The conclusion seems inevitable that since 'mind' does not appear in the original list of instincts, it represents something acquired. It represents a reorganization of original activities through their operation in a given environment. It is a formation, not a datum; a product, and a cause only after it has been produced. Now theoretically it is possible that the reorganization of native activities which constitute mind may occur through their exercise within a purely physical medium. Empirically, however, this is highly improbable. A consideration of the dependence in infancy of the organization of the native activities into intelligence upon the presence of others, upon sharing in joint activities and upon language, make it obvious that the sort of mind capable of development through the operation of native endowment in a non-social environment is of the moron order, and is practically, if not theoretically, negligible.

The net outcome of the newer type of psychological method is thus an unexpected confirmation of the insight of Tarde that what we call 'mind' means essentially the working of certain beliefs and desires; and that these in the concrete—in the only sense in which mind may be said to *exist*—are functions of associated behavior, varying with the structure and operation of social groups. Speaking in general terms, there is no more a problem of the origin of society than there is of the origin of chemical reactions; things are made that way. But a certain kind of associated or joint life when brought into being has an unexpected by-product—the formation of those peculiar acquired dispositions, sets, attitudes, which are termed mind. This by-product continually gains in relative importance. It increasingly becomes the significant acquisition among all the varied reorganizations of native tendencies. That anything which may properly be called mind or intelligence is not an original possession but is a consequence of the manifestation of instincts under the conditions supplied by associated life in the family, the school, the market place and the forum, is no remote inference from a speculative reconstruction of the mind of primitive man; it is a conclusion confirmed by the development of specific beliefs, ideas and purposes in the life of every infant now observable.