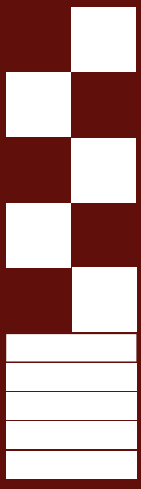
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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INTRODUCTION

An Overview of the Origins and Evolution of Suggestion Theory

Patrick Parsons

While much has been written on the history of media effects research in the United States, a casual review of the literature could reasonably lead one to believe that little if any such work was conducted until the 1940s. Most textbooks place the start of investigation during and just after World War II, with the work of Carl Hovland and colleagues at Yale University and Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia University. Wilbur Schramm (1963), who did as much as anyone to set the historic timeline, declared that the beginning of serious work on media influence began with four scholars: Hovland, Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, and Kurt Lewin. Steve Chaffee and John Hochheimer (1985) similarly observed that nothing that could be considered systematic scientific research on media effects began much before the late 1930s.

According to some versions of the origin story, to the extent that the public, policy makers, and even academics posited ideas about the power of media before the war, they were cast in the form of a "hypodermic effect" (Klapper, 1960) or "magic bullet" model of influence. Quoting Schramm, "Communication was seen as a magic bullet that transferred ideas or feel-

ings or knowledge or motivation almost automatically from one mind to another" (1971, 8–9). Not everyone has accepted the magic bullet tale, arguing that such a model never, in historical fact, existed (see Lubken 2008; Wartella and Reeves 1985). And indeed, Schramm concocted the term, in application to media effects, if not the concept. Overall, the exploration of effects research before World War II has been somewhat contentious and has left a cloudy picture.

In 2021, this author entered the conversation with a new view of that history (Parsons 2021). The anthology presented here is an extension of that work. It is centered on the concept of "suggestion," which was a specific and clearly articulated psychological process of attitude formation and change that dominated social science from roughly the late 1800s until World War II. What media scholars know today as "persuasion," social psychologists of the early 1900s would have understood as the process of suggestion. Suggestion, as defined by one leading theorist of the period, was "*the process of communication resulting in the acceptance with conviction of the communicated proposition in the absence of logically adequate grounds for its acceptance*" (McDougall 1909, 97; italics in the original). At first glance, the description appears to emulate the primary characteristics of the magic bullet model in the nature of its direct effects assumptions, and in fact suggestion does share, to some degree, that attribute. But where the magic bullet was said to exact uniform effects across all consumers of a message, suggestion theory was held to vary widely in its effects across individuals and circumstances. As will be seen, the contingent character of suggestion drove much of the research in the early 1900s. One of the consequences was the discovery of psychological processes that anticipated research on cognitive selectivity and cognitive dissonance conducted many decades later. The eventual decline of suggestion theory and its erasure from the memory of the field are discussed in detail in the prior work (Parsons 2021) and this process is briefly sketched at the end of this introduction.

This anthology, then, seeks to provide contemporaneous substance and context in a review of the history of the suggestion doctrine. By one count, there were more than 230 studies published on suggestion theory by 1939. While a mere thirty-one are presented here, they include the original statements on the subject from many of the leading social theorists of the age, including figures such as Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon in France and James Baldwin, Edward Ross, and Floyd Allport in the United States. The anthology also draws on the extensive record of experimentation published

in the early 1900s on the topic of attitude formation and modification and the role of media in the process.

The collection is divided into three sections: "Foundations," "Evolution and Variation," and "Applications." The first section presents the founding statements in suggestion theory. Suggestion was the child of French crowd theory and arose primarily from the work of Tarde and Le Bon just before the turn of the century. It was mated at the time with the theory of imitation, and the two in combination were employed in the analysis of crowd behavior, with special attention to "the mob." The core idea was that individuals in a crowd were prone to shed their rationality, joining in an automaton-like "crowd mind" and becoming susceptible to powerful charismatic speakers. In such a state, declared Le Bon, "all feelings and thoughts are bent in the direction determined by the hypnotizer . . . Under the influence of a suggestion, [the individual] will undertake the accomplishment of certain acts with irresistible impetuosity" (1903, 35).

The suggestion-imitation doctrine of attitudinal and behavioral control emigrated to the United States around the turn of the century, and it quickly found a home in the embryonic field of social psychology. In his history of social psychology, Gordon Allport (1968) declared that this doctrine came to dominate the field by the 1930s. As late as 1948, Solomon Asch, a Gestalt critic of suggestion, complained that the doctrine had become *the* theory "of the formation and change of opinions and attitudes. In consequence the psychology of attitudes is well-nigh universally (both in social psychology and in the social sciences generally) treated as at bottom an affair of suggestion and bias. This approach has penetrated nearly all regions of social psychology" (251). In short, social psychological analyses of opinion formation and change, across interpersonal and mediated communication, were dominated in these early decades by the doctrine of suggestion.

Theorizing and exposition from the early social scientists, therefore, constitutes the start of this anthology, where the emphasis is on definitions, categorization, and qualifications. Typical in these passages are efforts to identify various types of suggestion, stipulate conditions of suggestibility, and speculate about the impact of "social suggestion." The statements are broadly theoretical but with frequent allusion to potential real-world implications for both individuals and the general public.

The "Evolution and Variation" section first considers work done by social scientists to integrate suggestion into then-emerging models in social psychology, specifically instinct theory and behaviorism, as US research-

ers abandoned French crowd theory and advanced new models of collective behavior. Passages from William MacDougall and Wilfred Trotter on instinct theory and from Edward Thorndike and Floyd Allport on early behaviorism are featured here. One continuity of particular relevance is the manner in which suggestion is transported into their models without losing its essential nature as non-rational and automatic cognitive response to suggestions. Describing a stimulus-response process, Allport, for example, explains suggestion as a situation 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."

The selections on variation deal with the early recognition that the suggestion process, although psychologically non-rational and automatic, was nonetheless contingent in practice. The term "suggestibility" was adopted to illuminate the differences in the susceptibility of individuals to suggestions. Typically, and early on, psychologists identified age, ethnicity, and gender as variables in the process. The analyses, moreover, were usually racist and sexist (sometimes outrageously so), with some exceptions. As experimentation on the factors that affected suggestibility expanded, more and more variables, some having to do with situational context and some with the internal nature of the message itself, were identified as influential in the efficacy of the attitudinal impact. In many of the early experiments, the researchers produced findings and developed explanations for attitude change that predated by decades similar work conducted after World War II. By way of example, Carl Hovland and his colleagues (see, for example, Hovland and Weiss 1951–52), working in the 1950s, famously offered findings on "source credibility" as a significant variable in the process of persuasion, but the perceived authority of the source was heavily studied many years prior to that under its original label, "prestige suggestion."

This section also draws from some of the principal textbooks in social psychology to illustrate the taken-for-granted ubiquity of the doctrine at the time. The list of early researchers involved in this work, and presented here, includes names largely forgotten today, such as Robert Gault, Henry Moore, Frederick Lund, and Luther Bernard.

The final section, "Applications," reviews studies that used suggestion theory to explain and analyze propaganda, advertising, and, in one case, newspaper-incited crime and antisocial behavior. While the first two sections present work that often used real-world messaging to illustrate a theory or the implications of laboratory findings, this section considers writing that

starts with problems in practice to show how social scientists of the period engaged suggestion theory to either explore troubling social issues, especially political propaganda, or advance guidance and advice to professional communities on how to better sway consumers.

The section begins with a 1910–11 double article from the *American Journal of Sociology* that was one of the first rigorous empirical studies of the effects of newspaper reading and, moreover, was authored by one of the few women scholars in the field. The subsequent excerpts, on propaganda, include a journal article by Harold Lasswell that adds some illuminating detail to his more famous 1927 book on the topic, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*. Suggestion theory, which Lasswell referenced in both the article and his book, was a natural fit for the analysis of propaganda, given its assumptions about the inherent malleability of social consciousness.

As concern about and research on propaganda accelerated in the interwar years, the suggestion doctrine came to dominate public and scholarly understanding of the phenomenon. Leonard Doob's (1935) *Propaganda: Its Psychology and Technique* offered one of the best examples. While not included in this anthology due to copyright restrictions, it was a leading work on the subject from one of the field's preeminent social psychologists. In it, Doob crafted a version of suggestion theory alloyed with behaviorism and elements of Gestalt theory, ultimately describing suggestion as "the psychological process which causes men and women to change and to be changed" (1935, 405–6). He considered in detail the use of suggestion in propaganda across all forms of media, from newspapers, to radio, to cinema, qualifying the analysis with all the by then well-established conditions and contingencies of the process.

Another historically important text, published the same year, was Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport's *The Psychology of Radio.* Again, copyright issues precluded its inclusion here, but it was the most thorough and comprehensive study of radio to date and focused special attention on its implications for social life. "Radio," declared the authors, "is an altogether novel medium of communication, preeminent as a means of social control and epochal in its influence upon the mental horizons of man" (1935, vii). And they left no doubt as to the psychological process by which influence was exercised: "The mental mechanism upon which the propagandist relies is not reason but *suggestion,* which brings about the acceptance of a proposition for belief or action without the normal intervention of critical judgment" (62; italics in the original).

Suggestion remained at the heart of Cantril's theory of influence even in his more famous *Invasion from Mars* study five years later (Cantril, Allport, and Herzog 1966). There, he and his colleagues looked at the so-called public panic caused by Orson Welles's 1938 CBS radio production of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*. In assessing why some, but not all, listeners mistook the radio play's depiction of a Martian invasion for a genuine news broadcast, the authors explained: "Those persons who were frightened by the broadcast were, for this occasion at least, highly suggestible. Those who were not frightened and those who believed the broadcast for only a short time were not suggestible" (190). From Le Bon to Cantril, then, the social scientists of the early twentieth century called on suggestion theory to unwind and explain the effect of communicative influence in the context of advertising, political propaganda, and antisocial behavior, in dyads, groups, and disaggregated masses. It was the dominant paradigm of the age.

By 1940, however, suggestion theory was losing its intellectual luster. An underlying assumption of the rising spirit of Progressivism was human rationality. Through the 1930s, scholarly optimism about our potential for reasoned judgment grew, with implications in social psychology and sociology for suggestion's inherently irrational character. Christian Borch suggested it even had an ideological dimension, stating that "[suggestion] was hard to digest for liberal sociologists who launched a vendetta against the concept, eventually rendering it sociologically inappropriate" (2012, 17). At the same time, suggestion came under direct attack from an emerging Gestalt theory whose proponents privileged an explanation for attitude change based on thoughtful human evaluation. By the start of World War II, suggestion was largely out of fashion.

The convergence of these theoretical and even philosophical changes helps explain why suggestion theory faded from social science but does less to explain why the memory of its dominance disappeared as well. And in fact, this is only true in media studies. Any standard text on the history of social psychology—from Le Bon to Doob—will include a recitation of the role played by suggestion. It's reasonable to ask, then, what happened in the study of media? Briefly stated, the research conducted by Hovland's team at Yale after the war, and heralded as the start of media studies by subsequent scholars, eschewed the term suggestion. It was replaced by a new label: "persuasion." And even though the new nomenclature implied psychological process grounded in rationalism, much of Hovland's research still found irrational processes at work. In such cases, Hovland applied

the label "gullibility." So even though many of Hovland's findings echoed research conducted decades before, his linguistic pivot from suggestion to persuasion had the effect of cleaving suggestion theory from the historical record (Parsons 2021).

Subsequent histories only served to further seal off that past. Through the 1960s, as noted above, a number of influential books were published that in one way or another designated the work of Hovland and Lazarsfeld as the starting point for serious research on mass media effects. These included Joseph Klapper's (1960) summary of media effects research, Melvin De Fleur's (1966, 1981) textbooks on media theory, and, of course, Schramm's pronouncement on the founding fathers. In none of those works, nor in the many textbooks written by others in the field, did the history or even the existence of suggestion theory receive mention.

The problem was exacerbated with the post–World War II growth of academic schools and departments in media and communication, which frequently arose out of existing professional programs in journalism rather than in the social sciences. This evolution entailed the creation of graduate programs as the newly emerging field of communications or media studies began training its own PhDs. To the extent that these young scholars received any introduction at all to the intellectual history of the field, it was that crafted by Schramm and De Fleur. At the same time, sociology and social psychology were largely abandoning the subject area and moving on to other topics, a movement memorialized by Bernard Berelson's (1959) famous obituary to the field.

So the fields diverged, with the well-known intellectual insularity of the disciplines growing only more pronounced with increasing sub-division and specialization. For media effects scholars, suggestion, grounded in early twentieth-century social psychology, became a lost doctrine.

The following selections, then, are offered in hopes of repairing the historical record and providing greater insight into the extensive work on attitude formation and alteration conducted by psychologists, social psychologists, and sociologists in the first decades of the twentieth century.

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