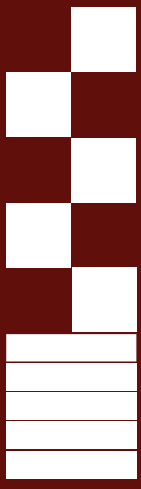
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



a
mediastudies.press
public domain
edition

Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

edited by Patrick Parsons

Published by:
mediastudies.press
414 W. Broad St.
Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

Copy-editing: Emily Alexander

Cover design: Mark McGillivray

Landing page: mediastudies.press/early-media-effects-theory-the-suggestion-doctrine

Public Domain series - issn (*online*) 2770-2480 | issn (*print*) 2770-2472

isbn 978-1-951399-28-3 *(print)* | isbn 978-1-951399-26-9 *(pdf)*

isbn 978-1-951399-29-0 *(epub)* | isbn978-1-951399-27-6 *(html)*

doi 10.32376/3f8575cb.f1e0489e | lccn 2024931261

Edition 1 published in December 2024

Contents

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Social Psychology (1931)

Ernest Théodore Krueger & Walter C. Reckless

New York: Longmans, Green, pp. 117–31 [with elisions].

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

By the 1930s, the paradigmatic template of suggestion and imitation was well set, as evidenced in the 1931 survey text by Krueger and Reckless. Walter Reckless (1899–1988) was a University of Chicago PhD in sociology (1925) and a student of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess. He taught at Vanderbilt University and Ohio State and was particularly known for his work on criminology and juvenile delinquency. Ernest Théodore Krueger (1883–1945) was a classmate of Reckless's at Chicago (PhD, 1925) and for some years a colleague on the sociology faculty at Vanderbilt.

In the following excerpt, Krueger and Reckless appear to accept, unlike some in the field, the basics of French crowd theory, including the power of social contagion and characteristics of mob behavior. But they then extend the concepts to mass movements and social epidemics. In these passages they offer some frighteningly prescient observations relative to today's social media. They declare, "Not merely do fads, fashions, and fancies take

on contagious proportions, but bugaboos, rumors, scares, dreads, unrest can like-wise spread and become epidemic."

Their treatment of crowds versus publics is more sophisticated than that of other scholars of the period. They note that there isn't just one all-pervading public but rather "many different kinds of publics." And here they delve, even more than Bernard, into the applications of theory to media practice. The public leadership previously provided by political and religious authorities now must compete, they write, "with the impersonal leadership of news, publicity, and propaganda." In fact, it is the particular media consumed by the heterogeneous groups that bind them together: "Whether a public in its organization is mixed or specialized depends on the material presented in the medium or journal which holds the group together. Hence it is that modern publics can be labeled sociologically by the papers or periodicals they read."

Broadly speaking, then, much of the work in social psychology, including the survey texts, treated suggestion first and foremost as a theoretical issue, with practical implications noted, sometimes anxiously, to provide illustrations of the psychological phenomenon. The following section turns that emphasis around and looks at work that was directed specifically at the social role of the media, using suggestion theory as an explanatory model.—*P.P.*

Social Psychology (1931)

CHAPTER V: SOCIAL BEHAVIOR ANALYZED

Social Behavior Defined.—While in the preceding chapters we have indicated the effect which interaction, contacts, and definitions have on human beings and the part which these factors play in molding human nature and personality, we have left still the problem of analyzing more definitely the ways in which a person's behavior is affected by the behavior of other human beings. An act performed under the direct or indirect influence of others or in the close or distant company of others has, to be sure, some claim to be called social since two or more persons are involved. But an act which is impelled, so to speak, by the behavior of company has another claim to be called social, because this act would not have emerged in the first place or would not have taken the form which it did take, had not company been present. Social behavior, therefore, is that activity determined by the activity of others.

For purposes of this chapter, we assume that the individual has all the necessary equipment, both native and acquired, to "take in" what others are doing and to respond to the activity of those about him. And furthermore, we shall not deal with the psychological individual (the organism) but the sociological individual, the person who is an organism plus all the accumulated effects of social experience. Consequently when we assume that the person has the necessary equipment to "take in" the behavior of company, we simply mean that he has a central nervous system, sensory apparatus, language, and ability to understand and interpret the activity of others. When we assume that the person has the equipment to respond to the behavior of surrounding persons, we have in mind that he can act reflexively, automatically, emotionally, temperamentally; that he can move and co-ordinate the limbs, hands, fingers, tongue, mouth, head, shoulders; that he can act habitually, tastefully, sentimentally, purposefully, and restrainedly. Moreover, the socially developed human animal (the person) usually has more than enough equipment to "take in" and "respond to" the demands of his social milieu.

The Characteristics of the Crowd.—The simplest and most elementary form of social behavior takes place in the crowd. The crowd consists, in the first place, of a collection of physically proximate individuals. The closer the physical distance, the greater the influence of organism on organism. The main effect of physical proximity is *barometric*. Individuals feel one another's presence. They feel the weight of collective pressure. The accompanying emotional disturbances are usually shortness of breath, discomfort, contraction, depression, until the crowd as a crowd gets into action, when the emotional reactions are registered in quickened heart beat, thrill, exhilaration, expansion.

The next characteristic of the crowd is focus of attention. A happening, an event, a crisis, a leader, may be the cause of individuals' being drawn within range of each other's influence. But whatever the circumstance, the minds of a collection of individuals must be oriented centripetally. Heads must be turned in the same direction; eyes and ears trained on a dominant object, in order for physically proximate persons to constitute a crowd. Focus of attention, after the attention is captured, brings about a control or a dominance at a center not necessarily an exact geometric center.

When attention is focused and dominance of the center established, rapport is set up. Rapport, as we shall use the term in connection with crowd behavior, means the state of mutual responsiveness or the condition where everybody is attune or responsive to everybody else, so that what happens

at the center can be communicated to the circumference and what happens at the circumference or any other point within it can be diffused throughout as well as carried back to the center.

The Bases for Contagious Behavior.—In this condition, where everyone is held within range of influence of every one else inside the circumference, behavior becomes contagious. This simply means that the state of rapport facilitates the uninhibited release of responses, whatever they may be—spoken phrases, shouts, applause, laughter, waving of arms, stamping of feet. The usual inhibitions which ordinarily lend propriety, caution, deliberation to the behavior of persons break down. Reserve is cast to the winds; restraint disappears, and abandon ensues. The individual's defense is down; his self-control is relaxed. He, therefore, is not in a position to offer resistance to the suggestions of others—whether these suggestions be verbal or motor. Thus it is that members of a crowd, in which control at the center is established and rapport pervades to the circumference, can follow suit on any suggestion which merges out of the mass action and survives long enough to circulate throughout the entire mass.

The Crowd More than a Collectivity.—Without assigning the crowd any mystical properties, we should note that it is more than a mere collection of people. It is a collectivity plus the effects of interaction and mutual responsiveness. While it is composed of individuals, still all these individuals with their responses cannot be added together statistically and total a crowd. In other words, a crowd is not composed of a number of "like-minded" individuals who are acting in "like-minded" ways. Although all individuals who finally get swallowed up in crowd behavior bring to the situation a repertoire of responses, this repertoire is by no means the same in every case. Even the detectable differences in equipment are not so important for collective action.

Development of a Collective Representation.—The significant point is that individuals get something from the atmosphere of their own presence, something from the collective interplay—something they did not bring to the situation. For the want of better terms we shall say that this something is a collective representation—a derived impulse to act in a specific way, a point of orientation, some plan or some gesture satisfying to those concerned. And this is developed just as a slogan or a battle cry is developed—collectively. "Berlin or Bust," "Onward Christian Soldiers," "Down with the Bastille," "Fifty-four Forty or Fight," are examples of collective representations which crowds in the past have developed. No matter how restless, indignant, out-

raged, or mad people are before they are turned into a crowd, individuals of the mass did not possess the collective gesture before the crowd experience.

Circular Response and Collective Behavior.—Furthermore, by virtue of the interstimulation, the individual's responses are intensified as we have indicated before. This applies mainly to his motor and emotional reactions. The process by which the activities of a group of individuals gain momentum, become accelerated, are reënforced by the collective interplay, is known as *circular response*. If the milling and interaction in a crowd goes on long enough, without distraction or disturbance, the group will work itself up to a point of frenzy, which is attended by violent bodily movements and wild, ecstatic behavior. Thus crowd activity at the beginning is usually mild in comparison with what it becomes when the group gets under way or is warmed up. Hence it is that the old-fashioned camp meeting or revival starts lethargically and ends in riotous orgy. If the circular response of crowd action proceeds up to the point of frenzy and delirium, individuals will continue, hypnotized by their own rhythm and momentum, until they fall exhausted. When persons are in this state, it takes more than an intellectual or a verbal stimulus to bring them back to their separately conscious selves. They must be given a severe shock in order to be revived. The cowboys have learned that one way to break up the milling of animals is to shoot off a gun over their heads. This turns the animal crowd into a panic of individual animals going their separate ways. Most crowds, however, do not reach the limit to which the process of circular response could take them. At best the crowd is doomed to a temporary, fleeting existence. And this is why a particular crowd has no future as a group. The excitement instead of being reënforced may die down; individuals may be distracted and break the rapport. The crowd as a unit may meet its Waterloo, that is, an obstacle or counteractant from without, which disperses it. Mob demonstrations in continental cities are now being broken up by cold water from fire hoses. And finally, the crowd may achieve its goal, which has the effect of consummation. Then comes the realization that there is no more to be done and "it's time to go home."

The Mob an Acting Crowd.—We have used the term *crowd* in the discussion thus far in a technical sense, namely, as a collection of physically proximate individuals, bound together by a focus of attention and a condition of rapport. This type of crowd has carried the label of "psychological crowd" (a term originally coined by Le Bon), although in common sense, a crowd means anything from an assembly or collection of people to a mob. We have seen that a crowd is something more than a gathering of people,

despite the fact that at a gathering individuals may be in close physical proximity. A mob has usually meant mass action, even in common usage. We may rightfully say, therefore, that a mob is an acting crowd. It is a crowd that finally does something, whether this something is the storming of the Bastille, the lynching of a criminal, the tearing down of a house. The final act, the climactic gesture, usually has legal and political consequences. Mobs have been associated with popular justice—mob rule—and mob action is curbed, so far as possible, in order to prevent violent demonstrations.

Orgiastic Crowds.—While we have crowds whose collective milling results in a final consummatory act of political consequence, there are crowds which are purely orgiastic—feeling and expressive crowds, so to speak. The bacchanalia is an example of an orgiastic crowd. Festal and ceremonial gatherings are prone to turn into orgiastic crowds, provided the occasion is not too formal. A revival service likewise is readily converted into an orgiastic crowd. It has been said that the religious sect is a chronic (orgiastic) crowd. By this is meant that many sects have developed a ritual by which their meetings become protracted.

The Sociological Significance of Crowds: Mass Movements.—The manifestations of collective behavior which we may observe at student mass meetings, at football games, and at conflagrations, should not minimize the sociological importance of the crowd in history. Periods of transition, in which political, economic, and religious changes are taking place, have had their dramatic mob and orgiastic episodes. Revolutions have had their mob scenes. The rise of new religious denominations, like Methodism for example, has been accompanied by throngs and demonstrations. The struggle of labor against capital furnishes us with many instances of mob action. The big strikes of the past thirty years almost inevitably have been colored by crowd behavior. The mass meetings at which the strike is called, the riots between strikers and police, the battles between the union men and scab laborers are cases in point. Reform movements, like suffrage and prohibition, have had their parades and demonstrations. Crowds gathered when war was declared and when the armistice was signed. The crowds of wartime tend to be mobs, which make political gestures. The crowds of armistice are orgiastic, with their "victory balls" and frenzied celebrations. And it may very well be, as some have contended, that crowd behavior functions as a safety-valve, as a device to release steam and pressure accumulated through periods of unrest.

How Suggestions Circulate.—The rapport established in a crowd means that behavior can become contagious. Hissing, applause, laughter,

running, waving of hands, when once picked up, circulates rapidly from center to circumference. The assumption is that individuals bring to the situation equipment which enables them to join the circulating pattern and that, due to the effects of focus of attention and rapport, individuals offer no resistance to joining. Under such conditions an act or a gesture of one person is a suggestion to be acted on, none too consciously, by another person. And contagion simply means that a suggestion—not necessarily a verbal one at all—has been picked up and acted upon by several individuals. Contagion is the diffusion or spread of the suggestion. Now suggestions in a crowd do not light on unprepared soil. Under crowd stimulation persons are usually prepared to act; they are "all set" to act in some way. The suggestion, which is picked up and which circulates, therefore, is presented at the ripe moment, when individuals are prepared to act somehow but need a form to follow. When the hiss or the hooray reverberates throughout the throng, we have here something more than mere stimulus and response. For under ordinary conditions we might look askance upon an enthusiastic outburst of a companion and not follow his lead (suggestion) at all. But the interaction in a crowd experience prepares the body for action and makes the individual gullible. Consequently, the person is ready to follow suit, when the stimulus (suggestion) occurs.

Leadership in the Crowd.—The leader of the crowd is one who can deliver suggestions at a moment's notice. He is a "quick-trigger" man rather than a deliberate, phlegmatic person. He is more of an actor than a thinker. His leadership consists in being sensitive to the crowd and finally establishing himself at the center. It is possible for him to emerge out of the crowd itself and bring the circumference under his dominance. If such is the case, he becomes the focus of attention and substitutes himself for the crisis which brought the crowd together. He gains ascendancy by being able to deliver a suggestion at the very time the crowd needs a gesture to follow. And, what is more, he is able to produce a suggestion which is not only picked up but which trains all eyes, ears, and nerves on him. He remains leader as long as his suggestions are followed. His achieving and maintaining dominance depend not merely on his ability to act at the right moment, but also on his being sensitive to the mood of the throng. He is in the delicate position of having to offer a suggestion to the multitude, and make it palatable, when the multitude itself wants to do something and does not know what it wants to do. Suggestions thus rest on the lap of the gods. They may or may not be taken up and they may or may not fit into the mood of the crowd, since

they are subject to the whim and caprice of the multitude. If, after gaining ascendancy, the leader presents the crowd with suggestions that are not taken up, he is dethroned, howled down, or forced to go off on a new tangent. However, those suggestions which fall flat, those which are not picked up or cause resistance, help to create a consensus of exactly what the individuals of the crowd want to do. While leaders may rise up out of the rank and file of the throng, it is also true that a person who has started in a position of dominance (like the orator) may convert his audience into a crowd. Orators are frequently capable of moving their audiences into action. They must be able to depict an impending crisis so as to bring the audience to the same point of rapport and inverted attention which would have been established by a natural crisis—the very point at which, if the throng is to act as a crowd, a leader must arise.

Social Epidemics.—Suggestions can traverse a much wider area than the small closed circle of the crowd. And they can be diffused from person to person, place to place, independent of the collective behavior within crowds. Contagious behavior, it should be remembered, is not limited to the crowd, although it finds in the crowd all the facilitating conditions. The circulation of fads and fashions, the waves of popular fancies are examples of the diffusion of suggestions which run beyond the narrow limits of a crowd and take on nation-wide proportions. Not merely do fads, fashions, and fancies take on contagious proportions, but bugaboos, rumors, scares, dreads, unrest can like-wise spread and become epidemic. Gold rushes, migrations, business panics, crusades, chauvinistic demonstrations, renaissance movements have assumed the character of epidemics—human landslides, so to speak.

Preparation for Following Suggestions.—Those individuals who join these mass movements are prepared ahead of time for the leap. That is, they are already restless, discontented, expectant, or yearning for something to happen. The behavior of others, whether through direct or indirect contact, presents a lead for the aroused person to follow. In many instances a definite concrete wish or an attitude is created by the suggestive activity of surrounding persons. In other instances, where the individual seems to leap into the current and to act immediately on a suggestion presented him, it is difficult to say whether a particular conscious motive is created first before overt action takes place, or whether the suggestion merely opens an outlet or channel for a pent-up charge in the body. Apparently in most social epidemics, some time (a few days or weeks) elapses before the idea

or suggestion takes hold and then it takes hold because it has created in the individual a desire to go that way. [...]

Characteristics of Publics.—In contrast to the collective behavior which takes place in crowds and social epidemics, we have also the interplay of individuals within publics. While there is a considerable borderline between the crowd and the public, we might say that a public is a discussion group. A public does not require physical proximity in order to function characteristically, although the forum may bring individuals together in an audience. It is important to note that the press and the radio have enabled publics to exist over a wide area and have eliminated contiguity as a necessary condition for collective action in the public. Sociologically speaking, there is not one all-pervading public. Rather are there many different kinds of publics. They really represent groupings of persons who are held within range of one another's influence by sharing a common interest or issue and by having a medium through which to express and exchange ideas and opinions. We might say, therefore, that a public is a group sharing a given universe of discourse. The individuals within a public are not merely responsive to the events which claim their interest and attention, but they are sensitive to what others think. While wrangling and differences of opinion are expected to be present within a public, yet out of these social dialectics develops some sort of consensus. If consensus is impossible at any point, a public is then ready to split, as has happened over and over again in the field of religion and politics. New creeds or new doctrines usually have represented the consensus of the dissenters from an older public.

Leadership in the Public.—The leader of a public is a thinker rather than an actor. He leads by statement rather than by movement. His appeals are, for the most part, intellectual, rational, logical. His leadership consists in formulating ideas, programs, goals, policies which his constituents will accept. After he has once brought his followers under dominance, he may, by virtue of his reputation and prestige, be able to make his followers accept his ideas uncritically, even prelogically. This, of course, depends on the extent to which he has been able to bring about consensus. If the leader of a public has been able to inspire confidence, get his leadership recognized, to implant a firm foundation of belief and faith in certain principles, individuals who comprise the constituency will blindly follow, meek as lambs.

Impersonal Leadership of News.—New types of leadership have developed in modern times. The leader who gets to the people, shows them the way, interprets life for them through the medium of the pulpit, the forum,

the editorial, even through personal touch (e.g., the ward boss) must now compete with the impersonal leadership of news, publicity, and propaganda. News places control in the hands of reporters and city editors, although it is a record or a recitation of events so written that the common man will understand. Instead of reacting to a leader's judgment as to what happened, individuals are now able to formulate their own opinions and make their own comments on the events of everyday life which attract notice. The newspaper has thus made the reader a witness to the significant events of a world-wide area, and enables him to know what is going on in the same sense that the villager sees about every happening in the small town. The responses made to news are determined largely by the direction of one's interests and the set of one's attitudes (such as intolerance, open-mindedness, shock, prudery, detachment, etc.). As a rule, the reading public is not satiated, and can be depended upon to react to news. The reaction may be in the nature of a changed notion (i.e., the acquisition of a new definition of conduct); it may take the form of mere comment (i.e., expression of opinion without registering any change in attitude); it may become translated into mass action, which represents an awakened or an aroused public's gesture. The "sob story" has created a sympathetic attitude towards the delinquent, who was formerly a scapegoat, while the exposures of crime and graft have led directly to definite crusades against the underworld and corrupt politics.

Publicity and Propaganda.—Publicity works on the principle that people must become familiar or acquainted with an object before they will react favorably towards it. Publicity agents assume that unfamiliar things, persons, or situations tend to breed caution, suspicion, fear, although they may arouse curiosity just because they are unfamiliar. It may be said that publicity defines objects for the public, calls attention to new values and in so doing creates attitudes and, in some instances (as in the case of commercial advertisements), even concrete desires. And, furthermore, it should be noted that publicity starts talk, provokes discussion which will win more adherents and strengthen the (favorable) consensus of opinion. Propaganda seeks to convert individuals to a cause—win them over to a side. It uses intellectual and sentimental materials for its appeals. Facts, figures, and logic are used as well as art, dramatics, and graphics. The former appeal to one's rational mind; the latter, to attitudes and sentiments. War posters depicting the enemy's violation of womanhood and childhood defined the situation in such a way as to produce righteous indignation. Propaganda, therefore, usually taps some previously existing sentiment or attitude which has been

lying dormant. If the wets give out figures on the cost of prohibition enforcement, the increased taxes, the loss of revenue following the abolition of the liquor traffic, they are exploiting a stereotyped distaste for high taxes and expensive government. It appears that any given public may be mixed, that is, be interested in many different issues—politics, religion, science, and sport. Or a public may be very specialized—such as a musical public, the horse-racing public, etc. Whether a public in its organization is mixed or specialized depends on the material presented in the medium or journal which holds the group together. Hence it is that modern publics can be labeled sociologically by the papers or periodicals they read. The newspaper undoubtedly creates the most heterogeneous public, since it runs the widest assortment of material and makes the most varied appeals.

Social Control and the Public.—No matter how heterogeneous or homogeneous, scattered or local a public is, it usually acts as a censoring group. Divergent human behavior has always been the object of scrutiny, and if it entails violation of convention or moral code, it creates a sort of crisis. The public through expression of opinion deals out criticism or punishment. The reason a public can exert pressure on the individual's conduct is just that it holds the person's position or status in its hands. Public disapproval, scorn, rebuke, means loss of status and a fall in the estimation of the group. The censoring public is called into being when a violation or infraction is discovered. The board of censors then has something to talk about, to discuss, to take action on. Villages, neighborhoods, large communities, even nations are converted into a public when a startling or shocking personal episode comes to light. The effect of public censorship is usually suppression; the violation is given judgment and the would-be violators are reminded of what will happen to them if they are caught. However, public suppression does not act as a complete deterrent; since there are certain individuals who will run the risk of being exposed or who are indifferent to the consequences of disapproval and since infraction has now become a popular way to attract notice to oneself. It has been said that one of Chicago's beer-running gangsters gets more attention in the press than the President of the United States, and that gangsters realize this.