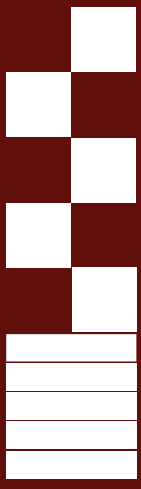
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Social Psychology (1925) & "The Concept of Imitation" (1926)

Knight Dunlap & Ellsworth Faris

Baltimore, MD: Williams & Wilkins, pp. 204–6 & American Journal of Sociology 3*2: pp. 367–78 [with elisions].*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the earliest writings, imitation and suggestion, as previously noted, were used almost interchangeably and frequently joined in the compound term *imitation-suggestion*. American social scientists quickly began efforts to untangle the concepts. Scholars such as Baldwin sometimes distinguished them by designating the suggestion as the stimulus and the imitation as the response. In this manner they remained paired as like phenomenon over the next several decades but, at the same time, developed their individual and unique psychological identities. So, suggestion became the term associated with general communicative influence, and imitation the replication of an observed behavior. As such, imitation, especially in children, would separate in research from studies on suggestibility and develop a life-history of its own, one that, by the 1960s, would lead to Albert Bandura's (1961) famous work on observational learning and the effects of media violence.

The intellectual history of imitation is beyond the scope of the present work, but the following two readings represent efforts through the 1920s to separate the concepts and more clearly articulate the characteristics of each, with special attention to imitation.

The first is by Knight Dunlap (1875–1949), an early leader in the field of experimental psychology. Educated at the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard, he taught for several years at Berkeley before joining the faculty at Johns Hopkins University in 1906. In addition to authoring multiple texts in the field, he founded the *Journal of Psychology*, was first editor of the *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, and served as president of the American Psychological Association in 1922.

In this short passage taken from his 1925 textbook on social psychology, Dunlap declares that suggestion and imitation deal "with the same process," yet he distinguishes them, as do others, by whether the stimulus that leads to an act is a spoken command (suggestion) or an observed action (imitation). In "normal life," he states, both contribute to "the springs of social action," but he associates imitation with the tendency to conform in social customs, manners, etc., stating that "the social effects of imitation are enormous."

While Dunlap's observations constitute a relatively small part of his much larger survey text, Ellsworth Faris's 1926 journal article deals exclusively with "The Concept of Imitation" and differs markedly from Dunlap by arguing for the impotency and even irrelevance of the idea.

Ellsworth Faris (1874–1953) obtained his PhD from the University of Chicago in 1913. He taught variously at schools in Texas and Iowa and returned to Chicago in 1919 to join the faculty, taking over as chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in 1925. He served as editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* and president in 1937 of the American Sociological Society.

Heavily influenced by George Herbert Mead, he envisioned behavioral causality in a complex web of interpersonal and social relationships and disdained unidimensional and biological explanations of the kind proposed by McDougall. It was from this perspective that he critiqued the concept of imitation. In the following article, he positions imitation as a type of behavior with a multitude of possible, often unidentifiable, interacting sources, contrasting it with the simpler "functional treatment" of Ross and the French theorists, and concluding, by this view, that it cannot be considered "a justifiable psychological category."

He distinguishes imitation from suggestion, along the same lines as Dunlap, and identifies three types of imitative activity: immediate and unplanned (e.g., crowd behavior), long-term and unplanned (e.g., the acquisition of a dialect), and conscious and intentional (e.g., buying a new car like the neighbor's) and formulates each into a "law."

Ultimately, however, he concludes that imitation lacks a specific and clear causal mechanism, and is, therefore, "a result, but an irrelevant result." Contrary opinions, he declares, stem from "defective analysis." Neither social psychology nor sociology would agree with Faris in the end, but the article offers a reminder of the diverse views in scholarly discussion at the time.—*P.P.*

References

Bandura, Albert, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross. 1961. "Transmission of Aggression through the Imitation of Aggressive Models." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 63, no. 3: 575–82.

Social Psychology (1925)

Knight Dunlap

In *imitation,* the stimulus pattern afforded by the act of another person produces, not the reaction of doing the act, but a perceptual reaction of some other type; and this first reaction, (the perception), produces an idea, (an ideational reaction), which includes the act. This ideational reaction may be produced immediately by the perception; or it may be produced mediately, by an intervening ideational reaction, or by a series of such. The distinguishing characteristic of the imitation reaction, in short, is the intervention of an *idea,* or a series of ideas, between the stimulus pattern of perception and the act which resembles that stimulus pattern.

The social effects of imitation are enormous, and are most conspicuous in the carrying out of the tendency to *conform.* Social customs, manners of speech, and details of dress are adopted from others mainly through deliberate imitation. No woman copies the type of costume of another woman except in so far as she has ideas that the costume represents a type which is to be worn by the group to whom she wishes to conform. Selective adoption of action is not impossible in the level of similitude reactions, but selection is vastly extended and facilitated by deliberation.

Ideas are simulated and imitated, along with other activities. Simply, or deliberatively, we adopt the religious, political, scientific, and other notions of others by repeating them. The expression of the idea by another person is the stimulus pattern; the thinking of the same idea is our imitative reaction. Although this is only one of the types of promulgation of ideas, and has been overemphasized in the theories of the past, it is important. All forms of the promulgation of ideas, including imitation, involve language, which is the most important of mental instruments, both socially and individually.

Neither similitude reaction nor imitation, therefore, is a means or method of learning, so far as specific acts are concerned. The reactor must have learned to perform the acts, or he cannot reproduce them. He cannot imitate the methods of speech of another person unless he has already learned to make the inflections and sounds involved, any more than he can imitate the starting of a motor car unless he has learned how to start it.

In another way, however, imitation may be an important method of learning; that is, in the synthesis of acts already learned as individual acts. One might learn to start an automobile by imitating the successive acts of a driver, provided one is already able to perform these successive acts. These acts being called forth in a certain order by successive imitation, may then become fixed in that order, in accordance with the laws of association, and the total reaction, comprising the series of previously learned acts, becomes learned.

In the simulation and imitation responses, the final act resembles the act of the other person which serves as the stimulus pattern; or else, the situation resulting from the act resembles the situation which constitutes the stimulus pattern. When one person's clapping his hands together causes another person to clap his hands, or when an American imitates a Britisher's drawl, we have illustrations of the first type. When the shop girl clothes herself, as nearly as skill and finances will allow, like my lady of the limousine, we have an illustration of the second type.

There is, however, another type of communication which is like imitation in that the ultimate act is the expression of an idea, not of a perception, but differs in that the idea does not result from a perception of an act or situation similar to the act or situation ultimately produced. This type of communication is properly called *suggestion,* and should be distinguished from imitation.[1]

[1]The confusion of the two types of action which has led to a fallacious explanation of all social behavior as "imitation" is due in part to the fact that we have the verb to *imitate* for the reproduction of a model; but we have no verb expressing the influence of the model

Suggestion is exhibited in a startling way in many of the phenomena of hypnosis; but it is no less present in normal life. On the other hand, neither hypnosis nor the social activities of normal life can be fully accounted for in terms of suggestion. If the hypnotist makes a bow to a properly prepared subject, the subject will bow in return; that is obviously imitation or else mere similitude reaction. If the hypnotist says "You will now greet politely Miss Blank, who is speaking to you," the subject again will bow. This is not imitation, but suggestion.

In both suggestion and imitation we are dealing with the same process, absent in similitude reaction, namely, "the tendency for an idea to express itself in action;" or more strictly, the tendency for the idea reactions to become strong and definite enough to produce outward effects of importance.

In normal life, suggestion and imitation contribute only part of the springs of social action. Many other factors contribute to the determination of the actions of man upon the stimulation furnished by other men, so that suggestion and imitation may be inhibited, accentuated, or reversed. Among these other factors, the influence of desires, and the process of associative recall of ideas are the most important. In hypnosis, both of these factors are reduced, so that the "suggestion" of a course of action fails to bring up associatively conflicting ideas, and the desires have less effect in impelling to or against the suggested acts. The effect of suggestion in normal life however, is very large.

"The Concept of Imitation" (1926)

Ellsworth Faris

The problem connected with those similarities of behavior called imitation has occupied the attention of most men who have written in the field of social psychology. Emphasized and slightly enlarged, the concept has given its name to whole schools of psychological and philosophical speculation. Formerly imitation was widely held to be a primary instinct, taking its place alongside the old standbys, pugnacity and fear. Recent writing on this subject has tended to introduce certain modifications. McDougall, for example, is unwilling to write it down as an instinct, but has worked out a

on the imitator; while, on the other hand, we have the verb to suggest for the influence which one man may have on another in this second way, but no convenient verb for the act of the person on whom the suggestion is made effective.

sort of imaginary switching arrangement by means of which the witnessing of the "expression" of an instinct may cause the same instinct to function in the beholder of the expression. Thus, while fear has its adequate and normal stimulus, the sight of a frightened person has a tendency on its own behalf to arouse the instinct of flight, which is the motor side of fear.

It is the purpose of this article to give an exposition of a point of view differing somewhat from those preceding. Imitation is a fact, or better, a name given to many types of fact. It is observed in many varieties of social experience, and must be dealt with in any thoroughgoing statement of human nature. But the thesis here presented is that imitation is not only a result of other causal or predisposing conditions, but that so-called imitation arises as a result from several widely different types of mechanism. Moreover, *the same causes or mechanisms or processes, which result in imitative behavior, can be shown to result also in behavior that is in no sense imitative.*

Imitation must clearly involve similarity in behavior to some copy or stimulus. To imitate is to behave like another, though all such likeness may not be imitation. There may be imitation of the movements of another, as when we copy another's dress, reproduce his movements, think thoughts like his, or have feelings and emotions which resemble those of another. Such, at least, is the usual and uncritical assumption.

The functional treatment of imitation, most fully presented in the writing of the French sociologists and engagingly stated by Professor Ross, assigns all these types of imitation to a single cause or mechanism. It is assumed that there is a tendency to imitate that is normal to human nature. Professor Ross goes further and assumes that suggestion is indissolubly linked up with the phenomenon. Man is a suggestible animal, and ideas, feelings, and movements are all thought of as suggestions, and produce in turn imitation. The behavior of crowds and mobs, the spread of fashions and conventions, the social heritage of customs, the conscious copying of new forms, and the unconscious imitation of gestures, dialects, and language elements, all these are assigned to the single and simple impulse of imitation, which comes to us through the avenue of suggestion.

Upon critical examination of the facts it seems necessary to make certain distinctions between different types of imitative behavior. There are at least three distinct and divergent sorts of reaction, which may be illustrated by three different types of phenomena.

I.

First, the behavior of crowds and mobs. A panic in a theater is picturesquely described as a sort of mental or emotional contagion. At first only a few are frightened, but their screams and frantic efforts to escape may be quickly taken over by others until the whole company is seized with uncontrollable fear. The anger of an excited mob is another instance of the same mechanism. Men find themselves in a mob by accident or join it from curiosity, but later describe their experience as being "carried away" by the emotion of anger. The voluminous literature on the behavior of crowds includes many descriptions of religious revivals, where those who come to scoff remain to pray, sucked into the vortex of religious emotion owing to the tendency to imitate the behavior of those who are observed. Into this class will also fall the panics and collective examples of enthusiasm which do not depend on the actual physical presence of the members of a group. Later in this discussion it will appear why this class should also include cases of hypnotism, in which one person responds to the suggestion of another when the inhibitions are removed by previously established *rapport.* These examples, which could be multiplied, are clearly cases of imitation, and the interpretation of them seems to be in general quite identical, but as will presently appear, the central explanation lies in the previously acquired habitual attitudes which receive a characteristic release.

Another quite distinct type of imitative behavior is the imitation of dialects and tricks of speech, which is a widespread if not universal phenomenon, and in the same category belong even more important imitative changes, which account for the acquisition of opinions, ideals, and social and political views, when one lives among other people, and is in communication with them. Evil communications corrupt good manners, and this is true imitation. Tarde's theory of criminality included this type of experience as well as the next or third category.

There remains a type of behavior differing from both the others. It is typified in fashion, and exhibited in all forms of conscious functional activity. Women who follow the new styles are hardly swept off their feet in an unconscious way, as the members of a mob are, nor do they gradually realize that they have bobbed their hair or shortened their skirts without knowing it. Much of our imitative life is of this character. It is a conscious copying. The model presented appeals to us first or last, and we go and do likewise. The interpretation of this type of behavior seems to be quite different from that of either of the other two.

If now we compare and contrast these three sorts of activity, it appears that the first type typified by panics and mob behavior is characterized by two adjectives, that is, it is *immediate* and *unwitting.* Sometimes it is spoken of as unconscious, but it is straining the word unconscious to say that an angry mob is not conscious. In typical mob behavior, however, it is not a deliberate purpose, but rather a partially realized activity which is most characteristic. Moreover, it is immediate or quick. Under excitement of a panic, there is not time to think and deliberate, and if one does think and deliberate, he finds himself acting differently from the others.

The second kind, typified by the acquisition of a dialect when it is not planned, differs fundamentally from the first. It is unintentional. It is often spoken of as unconscious, it is certainly unwitting. But unlike the first type, it is slow. It takes weeks or months sometimes, and certainly does not occur in the picturesque suddenness of the mob-activity type of imitation, though in cases of religious conversion, which are marginal to this, the climax may occur with a certain dramatic suddenness. In such cases we assume precedent processes.

The third type differs from both the others in that it is conscious, planned, intended, purposed. To buy a motor car because a neighbor has one, or to acquire a more expensive car like that of our social model, is to be under the influence of a distinct process, quite easily marked off from immediate, unwitting imitation, and also from the slow, unwitting type.

We have then the problem of interpretation which will reveal how these three distinct sorts of behavior come into existence. They appear not to be the result of the same motives or the same processes. Moreover, they are all complex, and ought to yield to an attempt to analyze them.

II.

When we examine carefully the first type it appears that mob activity involves a certain release of existing, that is of pre-existing, attitudes, habits, tendencies. The members of a theater party who are seized with fright are assumed to have already existing a fear of death and fire. Sudden alarm calls out, making kinetic and over-powering the tendency to save one's self from this danger. In the angry mob the situation does not differ. The fury of the members of the mob likewise rests upon already existing hostility, however latent or inactive this feeling may have been previously to the excitement. It is both picturesque and accurate to speak of the contagion of fury, but this contagion is the arousal of hostility and not the inculcation of it. The

hostile attitudes are evoked, made active and kinetic. White men have been aroused to extremes of emotion quite surprising to themselves, when in a mob attacking Negroes, and in the Chicago riots the Negroes found themselves in a mob on more than one occasion, but it was a mob of Negroes. I can find no record of a Negro being swept into the contagion of a mob of white people attacking a member of his own race.

Consider the case of hypnotism. Under the abnormally suggestive condition of complete hypnotic control the subject responds immediately to what he is told to do. The subject will masticate a piece of paper and call it good, if he is told that it is candy or beef steak, but if a person without musical training be sent to the piano, when hypnotized, and told to play a sonata, he will not, for he can not. The abnormal condition makes it easy to release existing attitudes, but does not create new ones. A Trilby, when hypnotized, will sing and sing better than ever, for suggestion may intensify a potential activity.

We have then this formulation of the "law" of immediate, unwitting imitation exemplified in the crowd behavior: *Imitation in crowd behavior is limited to the release of attitudes or tendencies already existing and which are not new.*

The immediate responses to suggestion, which are most striking in hypnotized subjects, depend upon extreme dissociation, and are, therefore, the same type of behavior as crowd activity. Immediate response to a stimulus without inhibiting tendencies is almost a definition of suggestibility. The important point here is that the behavior of an excited member of a mob is precisely like the behavior of a hypnotized person. It is, therefore, not limited to crowd behavior, but crowd behavior is a special case in the whole general class of suggestion responses, and it is important to observe that the hypnotized person rarely imitates; he usually obeys. It looks like imitation when the stimulus and response are identical or similar, but if the operator says, "Jump," and the subject jumps, no one whose mind is really alert would call it imitation.

There is another type of behavior which requires mention. Cases of the sudden imitation of social models by little children are frequent in the literature, and, while by no means wholly authenticated, probably do occur. Whether they be entirely new, or the result of the process set forth in our second type, is at present an open question.

If the above "law" be true, there is no justification for the older formulation that the activity or feeling comes into the mind from without. If we inquire into the explanation of crowd behavior, it is apparent that we will need to

know the past history or previous experience of the members of a mob, so that we may understand what attitudes are present that can be released. The one point here is that crowd behavior produces nothing new, but is limited to the intensification and activation of the habitual. There is a further point of the highest importance, namely, the failure of one emotional expression to produce its like in another, but this will be discussed later in the paper.

The first or mob type of imitation, being limited to previously existing habits, differs fundamentally from the second type, which consists essentially in new acquisitions. As stated above, this is typified by the widely observed and familiar phenomenon of acquiring a dialect, speech habits, tricks of manner, and gestures, as well as opinions, ideals, and beliefs. We have called this the slow, unwitting type. […]

It is clear that we must seek for some other process than the evoking of an existing attitude, if we are to understand such behavior. The key seems to lie in the normal human tendency to converse with one's self, that is, to stimulate one's self, and to answer one's own stimulation, in which process one takes the role of the other, and new attitudes from the other enter the repertory of the person.

This analysis of the process of conversing with one's self has been most elaborately set forth by George H. Mead. Social experience consists in gestures and sentences directed to others, and in answering gestures and sentences addressed to us from others. We are stimulated and respond. Others are stimulated by us and respond to us, the social action consisting in the peculiarity that the response to a stimulus is also *ipso facto* a stimulus to a response.

Each gesture, therefore, is both answer and query, both stimulus and response. When, however, the person is alone this same type of activity tends to go on, following the pattern of associated behavior. The individual then comes to stimulate himself and to answer his own stimulation, and to proceed to respond to that answer, after which he goes on to answer that response. As far back as Plato is found the recognition of the fact that thinking is a conversation with one's self. […]

Here we have an approach to the solution of the slow, unwitting imitation. To live over again the conversation or conflict is to say the words of the other in something resembling the same tone, and with the same attitude. It is literally to take the role of the other, to play the other's part, to assume the other's character. This would make it clear how the infidel might come to think like his clerical antagonist. It is utterly unlike mob activity, having

little in it of the release of stored-up latent attitudes, but is the gradual taking over of new ones, which, indeed, may be organizations of old elements. It is the normal human tendency of playing the role of the other when we reflect on past social experiences and re-live the past.

A "law" of this slow, unwitting type of so-called imitation we may then attempt to formulate as follows: *When in rehearsing the past, emotional situations are re-enacted, taking the role of another sometimes gives rise to a new attitude, which is so like the attitude of the other person that it is often called imitation.*

It is evident that we still require further analysis and observation to reveal just how this process can operate. In extreme cases, such as pointing with the lips, and learning to shrug the shoulders, there is involved a form of attention to minimal stimulations which should be the object of research.

This process has been fully treated by Mead and others under the head of redintegration. The incomplete present act tends to be filled out when tension exists, and this filling out is an integrating anew, that is, a redintegration. It is often called imagination, and includes everything within that category and perhaps a great deal more.

The third type of imitation differs from both the others in that it is conscious, volitional, and planned. Many young people go to college because their friends go. Some go to the opera for the same reason. Others buy listerine. The explanatory principle here must involve an underlying purpose or ambition, which is furthered or achieved by the imitated activity. To go to college gives one a standing, a promise of success, or four years of pleasant loafing, and this ambition or desire takes its particular form because of the models that are presented. It is not the imitated act that is the center of interest, but rather the act is the instrumental activity which forwards or realizes the already existing purpose.

The attempt to write out a "law" for the third type of imitation would result in a statement somewhat as follows: *When a purpose or ambition appears to be achieved or furthered by acting like another, the result is the phenomenon known as conscious imitation.*

The three types of imitation then rest upon three different preconditions. To understand the first we must know what are the habitual attitudes that are ready to be suddenly released. To explain the second we must take account of the gestures and opinions or convictions of others, which by rehearsing we come to approximate, while to interpret the third, we must know the ambitions or unfulfilled desires which the mental and muscular activities are assumed to consummate. [...]

IV.

It is then the conclusion of this discussion that imitation is hardly a justifiable psychological category. We have seen that habitual attitudes produce crowd imitation, that talking to one's self produces another type, and conscious choice a third. On the other hand, the releasing of old attitudes, talking to one's self, and conscious choice, all three result in behavior that no one would call imitation. Imitation is then a mere accident of these three quite distinct types of mechanism. There is no instinct to imitate. There is no tendency to take over immediately a like thought or feeling, and all the uniformities which have received loosely the name of imitation are to be interpreted in quite the same way as the non uniformities growing out of the same processes.

Imitation then is a result, but an irrelevant result. It is an apparent, but not a real result in a causal sequence. It cannot be brought inside of any general statement or psychological law. The contrary opinion seems to result from that type of error which has given us so many wrong conclusions in the past, namely, defective analysis.