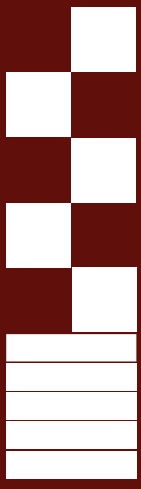
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Original Nature of Man (1913)

Edward Lee Thorndike

New York: Columbia University, pp. 289–93.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Real history is messy. The evolution of thinking on attitude formation and change was not unilinear. Lines of thought were multiple, chronologically overlapping, and frequently intertwined. Edward Thorndike (1874–1949) offers a good example. Cited by Dewey (above) as one of the important transitional figures in early social psychology, he mixed elements of instinct theory and suggestion in a larger context of proto-behaviorism.

Thorndike is known primarily for his pioneering work in educational psychology and learning theory. He took a BS at Wesleyan (1895) and an MA at Harvard (1897), where he worked, as did so many others noted here, with William James. He earned his PhD at Columbia University in 1898 and, after a short stint at Case Western Reserve, returned to Columbia where he spent the rest of his career at Columbia's Teachers College.

His earliest work involved animal research (typically cats); he was among the first to do psychological experiments with non-humans. He sought to determine whether animals learned most effectively through observation and imitation or through trial and error. He ultimately found for the latter, concluding that animals did not acquire new behavior through imitation.

As a consequence, in later work on adult learning, he rejected the efficacy of pure suggestion and imitation. He did, however, maintain a role for suggestion in a larger and more multi-faceted psychological process. Most of the major themes in his thinking about suggestion are evident in the following reading, which he interestingly casts in a very positive light, using examples aimed at promoting pro-social and even heroic behavior.

He starts with the observation that the mental system is a composite of multiple interacting elements, not always acting in concert: "Consciousness is the theatre of an incessant conflict."

He critiques unidimensional suggestion theory, although perhaps unfairly given the appreciation of suggestible variability even by strong proponents, but nonetheless saves for it a role as a trigger that can initiate behavior within a larger psychological context. Here he draws on McDougall's concept of instincts and James's concept of habits. "Successful suggestion toward an act consists in arousing, not the state of mind which is like that act, but the one which that act follows by instinct or habit, and in preventing from being aroused the state of mind or body which some contrary act so follows," he states.

In the last clause above, and throughout the excerpt, we also see Thorndike's reliance on the learned association between an act and its consequent effect. He was, in fact, an important figure in the history of social psychology for laying the early groundwork for behaviorism through his "law of effect." In his animal experiments, he discovered that acts that were found to be successful by the animal (locating food) were more likely to be repeated, and so behavioral associations that led to "a satisfying state of affairs" would be strengthened. Concepts of rewards and punishments, stimulus-response, and behavioral reinforcement were all central to Thorndike's learning theory and to the consequent theoretical paradigm that would dominate social psychology for the following fifty years.—*P.P.*

The Original Nature of Man (1913)

ORIGINAL TENDENCIES AS MEANS: SUGGESTION IN EDUCATION

If there were in human nature an original tendency to act out in conduct any idea present in consciousness, an easy and universal means to moral improvement would be to inoculate the mind with ideas of good acts. If all motor representations tend to realize themselves in movement the most remunerative form of education for skill and morals is to fill the mind with representations of the desirable movements.

Many thinkers about moral education have assumed the truth of the ideo-motor theory and so have trusted that presenting stories of noble acts was such a universal means of ennobling conduct. For example, Thomas says that "An idea always implies, in different degrees, an activity which tends to spread, a power which tends to pass into action and cause bodily movement.... To think of play or of study is truly for them (children) to play and to study." [Thomas, P.F., '07, *La suggestion: son role dans l'education,*' p. 5 f.] Sisson notes that the child "has a distinct tendency to do what he sees done, or hears about, or whatever in any way comes into the range of his perception. All these tendencies which are really summed up in the last sentence, constitute what is called suggestibility, or the tendency to repeat in one's own person any act the image of which enters the mind. The most clearly recognized form of this great tendency is, of course, imitation." [Sisson, E.O., '10. *The Essentials of Character,*' p. 13 f.]

The logical consequence of this doctrine is confidence that tales of heroism, thrift, sacrifice, studiousness and other virtuous deeds will tend to create them in the hearers—will surely create them except for the existence of ideas of contrary acts or strong contrary habits. So Thomas says:

> If the state of perfect monoideism could be realized, the execution of an act would always follow immediately the conception of it, and we have seen that such is frequently the case with children; but in the state of polyideism which is the mind's ordinary condition the case is different. Consciousness is the theatre of an incessant conflict which we take account of only at the moment of deliberation. ['07, p. 13]

Keatinge writes to the same effect:

> A certain portion of the mental content is attended to and becomes the idea which fills the focus of consciousness. Suppose it to be the idea of giving the whole of one's property for charitable purposes. As an idea this possesses the constant energy of all ideas in the tendency to realize itself. But the field is not clear for it. It is obstructed (a) by the inherited impulses and tendencies of self-protection, which incline one to make certain that one's own welfare is assured; (b) by the impulses arising from habit, which look askance at the tendency to give more than the small portion of income which is usually assigned to charity; (c) by a number of family prudential ideas, such as the duty of educating one's children or of assisting poor relatives; (d) by the fear that indiscriminate charity may do harm. As a result the incipient tendency to the renunciation of worldly goods is strangled at birth, and its only contribution towards the mental system in which it occurs is that of initiating a train of association. On the other hand (a) I may be the possessor of professional skill which enables me to earn my livelihood with ease, and may therefore be in no fear of indigence; (b) I may have inherited the fortune suddenly and therefore may have no established habits of dealing with money on a large scale; (c) I may dislike my children and my relatives; (d) I may be ignorant of the economics of social life. In this case the idea will be operative, and yet it is ex hypothesi the same idea as in the former case; the same impulse to give combined with the same conception of suffering, and the same anticipation of the pleasure to be derived from munificence to others. Stated schematically, an idea A introduced into a mental system has a tendency by association to call up other ideas and impulses, B, C, D, which may be (1) contrariant, critical, and inhibitory; (2) sympathetic and furthering. This is its total association value, and it works equally in all directions; it calls up ideas that are friendly to it and also ideas that are hostile. *This enumeration does not exhaust its latent powers. It possesses also a suggestive energy which may be converted into suggestive force, and which overcomes or avoids the resistance offered to it so that action results.* [1]
>
> These two qualities of an idea must be clearly distinguished. The associative tendency is not necessarily a tendency to action or belief. I may mass together a number of ideas that deal with a certain line of conduct, but the result may be no more than a clear understanding of the positions; for increased insight by no means leads to action if there is in existence a system of opposed ideas and impulses, and such a system is often called into existence in proportion to the size of the favoring system; while, on the other hand, an idea in so far as it

[1] Italics not in the original.

> is suggestive tends to realize itself quite apart from insight or understanding. [Keatinge, M.W., '07, *Suggestion in Education*, p. 30 f.]

This confidence that an idea will be realized in behavior if only we can get it into the mind and keep the opposite ideas out, has as its consequence, in turn, the expectation of vast moral improvement from the study of literary descriptions of virtue, the subservience of the scientific and practical aims to the moral aim in the teaching of history, and in the end the deliberate insertion in the curriculum of subject-matter chosen because it gives impressive ideas of good acts and so, supposedly, creates them.

It is, however, obvious to sagacious observers that ideas of good acts do not always, or even perhaps often, create good acts in this easy way, and that the effect in any case varies greatly with the individual and with the sources of the idea. So the very moralist who has boldly proclaimed that ideo-motor action is a fundamental law of conduct, may accept none of its logical consequences. Mr. Keatinge, for example, though specially interested in ideo-motor action, imitation, and suggestion, is compelled by his sense of fact to limit and encumber their action to such an extent that almost all of the practical advice given in his book, *Suggestion in Education,* might almost, if not quite, as well have appeared under the title *Habit Formation in Education,* or even *The Falsity of the Ideo-motor Theory.*

The whole practice of Suggestion, in medicine, government and business as well as in teaching, is, indeed, a mixture of wise action, based on certain undoubted powers of ideas to produce effects in behavior and of more or less crass charlatanism. The same theory of ideo-motor action that is required for the former apparently can be used to justify the latter.

It is, of course, my contention that the theory itself is wrong—that an idea does not evoke the act which is like it, but the act which has followed it without annoyance—that successful suggestion toward an act consists in arousing, not the state of mind which is like that act, but the one which that act follows by instinct or habit, and in preventing from being aroused the state of mind or body which some contrary act so follows. If, whenever John Smith thought of running away howling, he did in fact stay and confront the foe, a most potent suggestion to courage would be to get him to think of himself as running away and howling.

Everyone admits that in a vague sense suggestion may be potent. What is needed is some principle that will distinguish between its successes and its failures, between its scientific use and imposture. The ideo-motor prin-

ciple in its stock statements does not, the result being that efficiency in the use of suggestion either is falsely expected to result in cases where it can be proved not to do so, or is left dependent on an unpredictable combination of prestige, personal magnetism, rare skill and intuition born of experience.

If the doctrine of this book is true, suggestion will succeed in so far as it is a process of manipulating a person's ideas and attitudes so as to get him into a situation to which the desired response rather than another is connected by the laws of instinct, exercise and effect. It will fail in so far as it pretends to do anything more than this. An examination of the successes and failures of suggestion to see whether they do, in fact, follow this rule would be instructive, but I have found so great difficulty in getting the necessary data that I shall not attempt it.