

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SUGGESTION

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PART I *SUGGESTIBILITY*

CHAPTER I SUGGESTION AND SUGGESTIBILITY

PSYCHOLOGICAL investigators employ the term "suggestion" in such a careless and loose fashion that the reader is often puzzled as to its actual meaning. Suggestion is sometimes used for an idea bringing in its train another idea, and is thus identified with association. Some extend the province of suggestion, and make it so broad as to coincide with any influence man exerts on his fellow beings. Others narrow down suggestion and suggestibility to mere symptoms of hysterical neurosis. This is done by the adherents of the Salpêtrière school. Suggestion, again, is used by the Nancy school to indicate the cause which produces that peculiar state of mind in which the phenomena of suggestibility become especially prominent.

This vague and hazy condition of the subject of suggestion causes much confusion in psychological discussions. To free the subject from this confusion of tongues, we must endeavour

in some way or other to give a strict definition of suggestion, and rigorously study the phenomena contained within the limited field of our investigation. "We must not follow in the way of those writers who employ the terms suggestion and suggestibility in all possible meanings. Such carelessness can not but lead into a tangle of words. In order to give a full description of suggestion and make its boundary lines clear, distinct, and definite, let us take a few concrete cases and inspect them closely.

I hold a newspaper in my hands and begin to roll it up; soon I find that my friend sitting opposite me rolled up his in a similar way. This, we say, is a case of suggestion.

My friend Mr. A. is absent-minded; he sits near the table, thinking of some abstruse mathematical problem that baffles all his efforts to solve it. Absorbed in the solution of that intractable problem, he is blind and deaf to what is going on around him. His eyes are directed on the table, but he appears not to see any of the objects there. I put two glasses of water on the table, and at short intervals make passes in the direction of the glasses—passes which he seems not to perceive; then I resolutely stretch out my hand, take one of the glasses, and begin to drink. My friend follows suit—dreamily he raises his hand, takes the glass, and begins to sip, awakening fully to consciousness when a good part of the tumbler is emptied.

To take an interesting and amusing case given by Ochorowitz in his book *Mental Suggestion*:

"My friend P., a man no less absent-minded than he is keen of intellect, was playing chess in a neighbouring room. Others of us were talking near the door. I had made the remark that it was my friend's habit when he paid the closest attention to the game to whistle an air from *Madame Angot*. I was about to

accompany him by beating time on the table. But this time he whistled something else—a march from *Le Prophète*.

"'Listen,' said I to my associates; 'we are going to play a trick upon P. We will (mentally) order him to pass from *Le Prophète* to *La Fille de Madame Angot*.'

"First I began to drum the march; then, profiting by some notes common to both, I passed quickly to the quicker and more staccato measure of my friend's favourite air. P. on his part suddenly changed the air and began to whistle *Madame Angot*. Everyone burst out laughing. My friend was too much absorbed in a check to the queen to notice anything.

"'Let us begin again,' said I, 'and go back to *Le Prophète*.' And straightway we had Meyerbeer once more with a special fugue. My friend knew that he had whistled something, but that was all he knew."

A huckster stations himself in the middle of the street, on some public square, or on a sidewalk, and begins to pour forth volumes of gibberish intended both as a compliment to the people and a praise of his ware. The curiosity of the passers-by is awakened. They stop. Soon our hero forms the centre of a crowd that stupidly gazes at the "wonderful" objects held out to its view for admiration. A few moments more, and the crowd begins to buy the things the huckster suggests as "grand, beautiful, and cheap."

A stump orator mounts a log or a car and begins to harangue the crowd. In the grossest way he praises the great intelligence, the brave spirit of the people, the virtue of the citizens, glibly telling his audience that with such genius as they possess they must clearly see that the prosperity of the country depends on the politics he favours, on the party whose valiant champion he now is. His argumentation is absurd, his motive is

contemptible, and still, as a rule, he carries the body of the crowd, unless another stump orator interferes and turns the stream of sentiment in another direction. The speech of Antony in Julius Cæsar is an excellent example of suggestion.

All these examples undoubtedly belong to the province of suggestion. Now what are their characteristic traits? What are the elements common to all these cases of suggestion? "We find in all these instances a stream of consciousness that goes on flowing in its peculiar, individual, idiosyncratic way; suddenly from the depths of the stream a wave rises to the surface, swamps the rest of the waves, overflows the banks, deflects for a while the course of the current, and then suddenly subsides, disappears, and the stream resumes its natural course, flowing once more in its former bed. On tracing the cause of this disturbance, we invariably find that it is due to some external source, to some other stream running alongside the one disturbed. Stating the same in the language of Baldwin, we may say that by suggestion is meant a great class of phenomena typified by the abrupt entrance from without into consciousness—of an idea or image which becomes a part of the stream of thought, and tends to produce the muscular and volitional efforts which ordinarily follow upon its presence."¹

Is this our last say of suggestion? Far from being the case. On closer inspection of our examples we find some more traits which are of the utmost importance. The subject accepts *uncritically* the idea suggested to him, and carries it out almost *automatically*. This can be easily detected in nearly every instance of suggestion, but it stands out especially clear and sharp in its outline in cases of hypnosis.

I hypnotized Mr. F.,² and commanded that, after awakening, when he would hear me cough, he should take three oranges on

the table and give them to my friends who were present at the *séance*. I woke him up. A few minutes later I coughed; he snatched from the table the oranges, which were, in fact, nothing but ordinary potatoes, and distributed them among my friends. While carrying out this post-hypnotic suggestion he appeared to be in a peculiar automatic condition. His movements were hurried, as if some spring was loosened in his ideo-motor mechanism; his eyes were dull and glassy; it was plain he was in a semiconscious state. On my asking him afterward how the oranges appeared to him he replied: "They seemed to me rather queer; they were too small and heavy for oranges. I thought they were lemons, but I did not attempt to examine them; something impelled me to carry out the order and be done with it."

To take a still better example from the store of my hypnotic experiments: I hypnotized Mr. F., and suggested to him that after awakening, on hearing me cough, he should take the umbrella, open it, and promenade in the room three times. I woke him up. A few minutes later I coughed; up went his legs, but he remained sitting in the chair. I coughed again; once more up went his legs, but he did not carry out my commands. I rehypnotized him, and this time I strongly and authoritatively commanded him he should carry out my post-hypnotic suggestion, taking care to suggest to him he should forget everything that passed during the hypnotic trance. He was awakened, felt well, conversed with his friends. While he was engaged in conversation I went behind his chair and coughed. Up he jumped, opened the umbrella, and walked in the room three times. "When he was through with the suggested promenade the umbrella dropped from his hands on the floor, and, without picking it up, he sat down on a chair and smiled.

He remembered very clearly the umbrella affair, and it seemed to him queer and comical. I asked him whether he knew what he was going to do when he heard me cough. "Yes, I knew I must do something—in a general way, though." When I took the umbrella, I do not know how it happened, but I opened it and began to walk." I asked him whether he knew how many times he had to walk, to which he answered: "No, I did not know, but I kept on walking; and when it came to the end of the third turn, the umbrella dropped from my hands."

I could easily bring many more instances of the same type, but I think that those given will suffice for our purpose.

What we find in all these cases is the uncritical acceptance of the ideas or actions suggested, and also the motor automatism with which these ideas or actions are realized. In short, mental and motor automatism constitute the prominent elements of suggestion.

There is, however, one more element in suggestion—an element which must be taken into account, and without which our definition of suggestion will be incomplete. This factor, or element, is the overcoming or circumventing of the subject's opposition. The suggested idea is forced on the stream of consciousness; it is a stranger, an unwelcome guest, a parasite, which the subject's consciousness seeks to get rid of. The stream of the individual's consciousness combats suggested ideas as the organism does bacteria and bacilli that tend to disturb the stability of its equilibrium. It is this opposition element that Dr. J. Grossmann has in mind when he defines suggestion as "der Vorgang, bei dem eine Vorstellung sich einem Gehirn aufzuzwingen versucht."³

My friend would not have rolled up his paper, nor would Mr. A. have taken the glass and sipped the water, nor would Mr. P.

have whistled his airs, nor would the crowd have bought the articles of the huckster or voted for certain political candidates had they been openly commanded to do so. They would have opposed strenuously the suggestion given to them. It was required to devise means in order to circumvent this opposition. The same necessity for circumvention of opposition we find in post-hypnotic suggestion. At first the subject F. opposed the idea of walking with the umbrella. When I rehypnotized him I asked him, "Why did not you carry out my command?" The reply was, "I wanted to see whether I could resist." That this was actually the case we can see from the fact that, while his legs started at the signal and went up to fulfil the order, Mr. F. exclaimed, "I know what you want me to do, but I will not do it." This opposition was overcome only after repeated and insistent injunctions that he must obey my command.

The first stages of hypnosis are especially characterized by this spirit of opposition, which, however, gradually slackens as the subject falls into a deeper state of hypnosis, and completely disappears with the advent of somnambulism. To watch the struggle of the mind in its opposition to the engrafted suggested idea is of intense interest to the psychologist, and of great value to a clearer comprehension of suggestion itself.

I hypnotized Mr. J. F. With one resolute command I made him cataleptic. "Rise!" I commanded him. He rose. "Walk!" He walked. "You can not walk forward! " He tried to walk, but he could not. " You can only walk backward!" He began to move backward. At the very first sitting he seemed to have fallen completely under my control and to carry out without any opposition all the motor suggestions given to him. This, however, was not really the case. Opposition was there, only it was ineffective. As we continued our sittings (and we had many

of them) Mr. J. F. became more and more intractable, my control over him grew less and less, and now it is only after great exertion and repeated imperative commands that I am enabled to bring him into any cataleptic condition at all. The opposition or inhibition kept in abeyance during the first séance asserted itself as the subject became more familiar with the hypnotic condition.

The following experiments are still more interesting, as revealing to us in the clearest way possible the internal struggle—the great opposition which the consciousness of the subject shows to the parasitic suggested idea:

Mr. L. falls into a slight hypnotic condition—into the first degree of hypnosis; he can open his eyes if I challenge him that he is unable to do it. Although his hypnosis is but slight, I still tried on him post-hypnotic suggestions. While he was in the hypnotic condition I suggested to him that after awakening, when he will hear a knock, he will go to the table, take a cigarette, and light it. I suggested to him he should forget everything that passed during the hypnosis.

On awakening he remembered everything. I gave a few knocks in quick succession. He rose from his chair, but immediately sat down again, and laughingly exclaimed, "No, I shall not do it!" "Do what?" I asked. "Light the cigarette—nonsense!" "Had you a strong desire to do it?" I asked him, putting the desire in the past, although it was plain he was still struggling with it. He did not answer. "Did you wish very much to do it?" I asked again. "Not very much," he answered curtly and evasively.

On another occasion I hypnotized Mr. L. by the method of fascination.⁴ He seemed to have fallen into a slightly deeper hypnotic condition than usual. The post-hypnotic suggestion

was to light the gas, and also complete amnesia. On awakening he remembered everything that passed during hypnosis. He ridiculed the post-hypnotic suggestions I gave him. After a few minutes' conversation, without my giving the suggestion signal, which was to be a knock, I left the room for a few moments—for five or ten seconds. When I returned I found him lighting the gas. "What are you doing that for, Mr. L.?" I asked. "To feel easier," he answered; "I felt somewhat uneasy." Evidently the post-hypnotic suggestion took deep root in his mind. He struggled hard against it, to put it down, to suppress it; and it was due to this fact that he attempted to counteract the suggested idea by ridiculing it. As long as I was in the room he wanted to show the energy of his will, and he struggled hard against the insistent idea, keeping it at bay; but when I left the room one of the motives of resisting the suggestion was removed, and the struggle became an unequal one. The insistent parasitic idea asserted itself with greater force than before, and this time, not meeting with such a strenuous opposition, it gained the upper hand and realized itself completely.

To take one more instance of the many sittings I had with M. L. I hypnotized him once in the presence of two acquaintances of mine, and gave him a post-hypnotic suggestion to take from the table a box of matches and light the gas. This he had to do when hearing me cough. I woke him up, and as soon as he heard me cough he started up from his chair, looked hard at the box of matches, but did not take it. He went up to the window, put his head against the window pane, and seemed to be engaged in a severe struggle against the insistent suggested idea. Now and then one could perceive a slight shudder passing over his entire body, thus making almost palpably evident the inner, restless, contentious state of his consciousness. Again

and again the suggested idea cropped up in his mind, and again and again it was suppressed; now the suggestion gained ground, and now once more it was beaten and driven back into the obscure regions from which it came. I then rehypnotized him, strongly emphasized my suggestion, and then awakened him. I slightly coughed. This time the suggested idea got a stronger hold of his mind. Mr. L. rose from his chair, took the box of matches, kept it in his hand for a second or two, and threw it resolutely on the table. "No," he exclaimed, "I will not do it!"

Such cases might be multiplied by the hundreds, but I think that the hypnotic experiments made on my subjects L. and J. F. will suffice for our purpose. They show most clearly that the trait of opposition is an ingredient of suggestion. This opposition element varies with the state of mind of the individual. What the nature of this variation is we shall see later on; meanwhile the present stage of our discussion fully enables us to formulate a definition of suggestion and suggestibility.

By suggestion is meant the intrusion into the mind of an idea; met with more or less opposition by the person; accepted uncritically at last; and realized unreflectively, almost automatically.

By suggestibility is meant that peculiar state of mind which is favourable to suggestion.⁵

1. Psychology, vol. ii.

2. Let me say at the outset that all the subjects on whom I made hypnotic experiments were never hypnotized by anyone else before. Whatever, therefore, occurred during hypnosis was not due to previous suggestive training unknown to me. Each subject was fully under my observation. I took the precaution of isolating my subjects from extraneous suggestion. During trance I suggested to them that no one should be able to hypnotize them. I ask the reader to hear this in mind.

3. Zeitschrift für hypnotismus, August, 1893.

4. Ordinarily I use the method of Nancy: it is the most convenient and pleasant way

of hypnotization, as it requires no strain on the side of the subject.

5. The psycho-physiological state of suggestion I term suggestibility. By "*suggestibility of a factor*" is meant the power of the factor to induce the psycho-physiological state of suggestion of a certain degree of intensity, the suggestiveness of the factor being measured by the degree of suggestibility induced.