**Suggestion, affect and speculative science**

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**Abstract [not to be included in the print version]**: This chapter responds to Isabelle Stengers’ invitation to invent more innovative propositions to explore the potential of what it might mean to enter into suggestive relations with another, human and more-than-human. It will argue that exploring suggestion as a technical matter requires attending to the milieux and settings that shape what suggestion could and might become in all its diverse modalities. Drawing inspiration from the field of affect studies, weird science, science studies, and critical media psychology, it argues for a speculative science or Future-Psychology that mines the potential of epistemic uncertainties, foreclosures and displacements in the histories of suggestion, contagion, and imitative processes across the psychological sciences. Drawing on genealogical research it compares a contemporary neuroscientific experiment exploring ‘alien phenomenologies’ with earlier psychological experiments into automaticity (automatic reading) that were proto-performative rather than adjudicating truth from falsehood.

**Introduction**

The question of what suggestion is, could be or, more interestingly might become, has puzzled and perplexed me throughout my academic career. It has also intruded into my life when as a young child my mother suggested to me, whilst she was in the throes of a psychotic breakdown that I didn’t need to wear shoes to school. This suggestion was communicated with an energy and enthusiasm. She linked shoes to conformity and stifling claustrophobia, and bare feet, which my Mother was advocating by example, to freedom, expansion, hope and optimism. Off I went to school at the age of 9 in bare feet. The school wasn’t far, perhaps 500 meters from the house, but it was a typical British summer day – chilly and grey. I didn’t learn much about suggestion that day, but I did learn a lot about shame, humiliation, surveillance, concern and the stigma of growing up with a Mother who has been hospitalized in psychiatric hospital for regular intervals throughout her life.

Experiences such as this are often subsumed as examples of suggestion, contagion and imitative processes that are primarily experienced and communicated through an ‘alien phenomenology’. Alien phenomenologies are those, which in different ways, people might experience as *feeling* that they are being moved to action by someone or some*thing* else. Within the psychological and cognitive sciences this is usually referred to as automatism or automaticity. My own mother whilst unwell, communicated such feelings of ‘alien control’, possession, thought insertion, and altered bodily experiences that shaped unusual patterns of sense making and sensation.

For anybody who has grown up with similar experiences, the normative expectation within western psychology that unitary control and self-determination are what define subjectivity might be difficult to stomach. This is part of the individual-social dualism that although subjected to extensive critique, both within and outside psychology, has come to dominate how suggestion, contagion and imitation have taken hold within the psychological sciences and popular imaginaries. The question of what suggestion is, might be or could become has become an interesting focus of recent research within the field of affect studies and is one that will be explored in the next section. The overall focus of the chapter will be on exploring the implications of some of these debates, including some of my own research, that open up to more speculative, innovative propositions to take forward at the intersection of sociology, cultural theory, art and what I am calling a speculative science or Future-Psychology.

**Affect and suggestion**

My research over many decades has been concerned with a lexicon of terms, concepts, strategies and phenomena that blur the borders and boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, human and technical, body and society, individual and collective. This includes suggestion, contagion and imitative processes, as well as voice hearing and other phenomena that often appear as signs of psychopathology, as examples of abnormal perceptions, or even as curious anomalies and puzzles. They are primarily the subject of the *psy* sciences (psychology and psychiatry), whilst often registering as examples of weird science.[[1]](#footnote-1) In different ways they have also provided heuristics for theorising collective phenomena or experiences that point towards the fundamental connectivity and relationality of self-other relations. These phenomena in different ways disrupt or trouble the presumption that what defines the human is self-control, self-determination, individualisation and strict borders and boundaries between self and other, human and non-human. This is a cultural belief or invitation that has come to pass as a ‘fiction-which-functions-in-truth’ primarily structuring neoliberal forms of governance and regulation.

In *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (2012), these phenomena are brought together as examples of ‘threshold phenomena’ disrupting notions of psychological individualism. I argue that the genealogies of these phenomena open up some interesting speculative propositions about the nature of mind, body, self and other, especially when we foreground the epistemic uncertainties, foreclosures, and what has become displaced, disavowed or denied in the explanations and discourses that have come to pass as historical truths or facts. I refer to these epistemic uncertainties or foreclosures as part of the *historialities* ofscience that can be mined for critical thought and innovative experimental practice. Historialites is a term I have borrowed from the scientist and philosopher Hans-Jorg Rheinberger (1994). The term draws attention to science as a story-telling practice governed primarily by an excess of stories, primarily existing as fragments co-mingling from the past, present and not-yet-told that become displaced, submerged, and even disavowed. The traces to such an excess are revealed through paying attention to the historicity and dynamics of such storytelling practices as I develop in my book, Haunted Data: Transmedia, Affect, Weird Science. Rheinberger’s contribution to this project will be developed later in the chapter.

My research into suggestion, contagion, and imitative processes is also connected to the field of affect studies, and the renewed focus on registers and modalities of attending to the world that exceed conscious rational thought or that exist at the edges of consciousness. Some of the distinctive markers of the field include a critical re-appraisal of the sciences (and particularly the psychological and neurosciences) by the humanities; a critical and creative re-engagement with ontological as opposed to epistemological concerns; a grounding of what might have passed as immaterial within a neo-materialist reading of what a body is capable of doing, and to that end a radical re-conceptualisation of embodiment. This is often framed beyond a distinctly singular, phenomenologically experiencing human subject. Of course these concerns have pre-histories that affect acts as an *attractor* for and pick up on more longstanding debates surrounding power, agency, subjectivity and biopolitics; and how to invent methodological and conceptual apparatuses that allow a purchase on the question of power, subjectification and the complex problematic of subjectivity. This is often but not always set within a de-stabilization of what it means to communicate beyond the context of (human) talk, discourse and conversation. This includes an exploration of theories that are sensitive to non-human agencies, entanglements and thresholds, which confound and unsettle humanist and sometimes post-humanist beliefs and sentiments (see Clough, 2008; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010).

Affect theories and the field of affect studies have been a very influential interdisciplinary focus of research and thought, which can be found across a range of disciplines, including literature, philosophy, cultural theory, media studies, film studies, art and curatorial study, queer theory, feminism and critical race studies. One assumption made within some affect theories is that there is a half second delay between affect and cognition. This statement is sometimes referred to, following the work of Brian Massumi (2002), as evidence of the *autonomy* of affect. There is a growing edifice being assembled on the basis of this assumption, which has become something of a ‘black box’ across affect theories (Latour, 1987). The statement itself might be considered part of a surface of emergence, which has led to critique and counter-critique, and the mobilization of certain theories and theorists (such as Silvan Tomkins), for example, to authorize and extend its reach. It also opens affect theories to the cognitive and neurosciences and relates to an area of scholarship within cognitive science known as automaticity research.

Automaticity research is broadly speaking concerned with processes that exist below the threshold of conscious awareness and attention. In the more conventional sense of the term automaticity explores processes that feel automatic, that might become habitual and that do not demand our attention. However, automaticity research also focuses on experiences that explore how we can be made to do things without being consciously aware (so-called unwilled action), and to that extent has a much more controversial side. Automaticity research brings together all kinds of enigmatic behaviours and puzzling phenomena facing modern psychology and often falls under the rubric of *weird science.* This includes hypnotic suggestion, trance states, voice hearing, motor automatisms (including involuntary muscular movements), various contagious phenomena and ‘actions that are so remarkably divorced from a feeling of doing’ (Ansfield and Wegner, 1996: 483), that they are often attributed to supernatural forces.

The field of affect study includes an important recognition that normative conceptions of self-determination and psychological autonomy occlude questions of how power works in registers that are never simply conscious or rational. As many scholars across the social sciences and humanities have argued, ‘philosophers and critics have largely neglected the important role our corporeal-affective dispositions play in thinking, reasoning and reflection, then it seems to follow that an account of affect and its place in our lives and institutions is called for’ (Leys, 2011: 436).[[2]](#footnote-2)

We encounter affect in descriptions of architecture (as atmosphere, immersive, immaterial), in discussions of objects as enchanted and captivating, in discussions of social media and networked affect and the question of what gains a reach and traction and why, and in relation to political and governmental practices and policies. This includes the relationship between post-truth politics and the registers of emotion and feeling. Across a broad rubric of disciplines, which cross the arts, humanities, social, human and natural sciences, there is a renewed interest in how our experiences might be understood, targeted and modulated via processes understood to exist below the threshold of conscious attention.

These processes open the subject to modalities of power and mediation understood to be suggestive, or operating with the potential for contagion or imitation, for example.They invite consideration of what it might mean to govern through affect or what I term processes and practices of ‘psychomediation’ (see Blackman, 2018). The logics underpinning these strategies of governance draw from the psychological sciences and particularly theories, concepts and understandings, which have attempted to understand the suggestive capacities of human subjects; turning attention to processes that are assumed to not be accessible to conscious awareness or control.

**Suggestion and the discourse of the vulnerable mind**

‘But above all, what do we really know about this suggestion that we are supposed to avoid?’ (Stengers, 1997: 103)

‘it is logical, in particular to ask oneself what hypnosis would be if it was rid of the illusion whereby the hypnotist is situated as an external observer of his patient; what is more*, it is logical to again raise the question of knowing what suggestion can do in its many diverse modalities* from the moment it is stripped of the illusion that the one who suggests knows what he is doing and can control the meaning and consequences of his suggestions with regard to the one he is addressing’ (1997: 105, emphasis added).

These deliberations are also the subject of Isabelle Stengers’ engagement with scientific understandings of suggestion, particularly within the context of hypnotic suggestion. Stengers’ arguments raise the important question of how our understandings of suggestion and contagious phenomena have been framed by historical discourses, which have primarily associated suggestion, contagion and imitation with a lack of will or loss of self-control, as the intrusion of the irrational, or evidence that the primitive and animal have not been successfully renounced. She argues that our understandings of suggestive phenomena have been closed down, due in part to suggestion's close association with Hitlerism, propaganda, fascism, dictatorships, crowd psychology, and the image of an evil Svengali figure manipulating others (see Stengers, 1997; Blackman, 2012; Borch, 2012).

Suggestion primarily registers as lack, deficit or abnormality, part of a set of assumptions and *apriori’s* within the psychological sciences that have long histories. It is assumed that the normative psychological subject is aware and has ownership of their thoughts and movements and importantly is in control of them. This produces suggestion as an aberrant phenomenon, providing evidence that the person has renounced self-control and submitted to the will of an Other. However, this historical *apriori* does not stand up, even within scientific studies exploring suggestion within the context of automatism as we will go on to explore.

As an example I am going to discuss a neuroscientific experiment that was designed to explore suggestion and automatism. It used a technique of hypnotic induction in order to induce a sense of motor automaticity. In this case, hypnotic induction was used to hypnotise subjects such that they would experience their own arm moving *as if* it were being moved by an extra-personal entity. In order to do this they constructed an experimental apparatus, which included a mock MRI scanner, and a writing apparatus that drew inspiration from devices, such as the planchette, which has been used in techniques of automatic writing. The participant was required to lie in the mock scanner with a paper roll that was part of a constructed writing frame. The participant was asked to close their eyes while the experiment took place (Walsh et al., 2014).

The referencing to earlier experiments into automatic writing within psychic research was one reason why this experiment was deemed controversial. It was discussed, for example, by the broadcast media in a special issue of the BBC Radio 4 series, *All in the Mind* with the attention-grabbing title: *Hypnotism, Automatic Writing, Magic and Memory*.[[3]](#footnote-3)The analytics of the experiment was a typically positivist empirical analytics framed within an individual-social dualism or subject-object bifurcation. It was assumed by the researchers that suggestion is a capacity that is measurable by a set of personally traits based on what is known as the ‘highly suggestible personality’. These people are then considered more open to suggestion and the possibility of a particular experimental apparatus producing altered experiences of movement, sensation and thought. In this case the experimental apparatus is presumed to simulate what are described as dissociative and passivity phenomena. These ‘analogues’ (Walsh et al., 2014: 35) are taken to correspond to the phenomenological experience of automaticity – the *feeling* of being moved or directed by someone or something else.

Within this study automaticism is viewed as a common experience which links dissociative phenomena (the experience of doubleness or dividedness); with experiences of trance that might be found in Shamanic cultures; and with what are considered psychopathological symptoms such as thought control that might be found within Schizophrenia. However, and this is what is much more controversial from a sociological or anthropological perspective, there is an interesting anomaly that is highlighted in the study but left going nowhere, opening to alternative conceptions of suggestion, which are displaced, foreclosed and submerged.

On the one hand the experimenters assume that *the normative psychological subject is aware and has ownership and control of their thoughts and movements*. However, the authors also highlight an important tension in the experiment that challenges and exceeds the *apriori* they are working with. They are unable to engage this anomaly due to the assumptions they bring about the capacity to enter into suggestive relations with another. They assume that ‘hypnotic phenomena must be experienced as involuntary and effortless’ by hypnotized subjects (Walsh et al., 2014: 33), whilst recognizing that this actually relates to a set of cultural beliefs or ‘expectancy effects’ about hypnotic suggestion, which are tied to ‘explicit learning’. Within the social sciences and humanities these processes of constitution are more likely to be framed by the concept of mediation (see Blackman, 2012).

The paradox of mediation has been captured by the term ‘*cultural invitation*’, developed by the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (2011) within the context of both voice hearing and suggestion. Cultural invitation identifies how local theories of mind shape perception, sensation and attention (what is sometimes referred to as ‘folk psychology’). Similarly, anthropologists such as Thomas Csordas (1994), who work within the tradition of cultural phenomenology, have called this the cultural basis of ‘somatic modes of attending to the world’. This is an interesting area and one that raises important questions about how experiences deemed raw, automatic, visceral, or even outside or at the fringes of consciousness, are cultural and historical all the way down, right to the bottom.

Another assumption embedded within the experiment is that suggestibility is itself a trait that identifies those who are more susceptible or vulnerable to influence. This bifurcation between the individual and the social has a long history within the psychological sciences, and is one that draws its inspiration from evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology has provided and shaped a set of assumptions about the nature of suggestion that are difficult to shake. This includes that suggestion is primarily a capacity found within people who are considered inferior and closer to the animal and primitive.[[4]](#footnote-4) In previous writing with Valerie Walkerdine, we termed this assumptionthe ‘discourse of the vulnerable mind’ arguing that its intractability within the psychological sciences prevents researchers from considering alternative propositions.

Within the context of media psychology, for example, one of the places it regularly appears is in discussions of media practices and technologies and the supposed effects media have on particular groups considered more suggestible and susceptible to media influence. In a book *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media studies* (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001), we explored the significant influence that the crowd psychologist, Gustave Le Bon (1922) had on the discipline, and the way his theories articulated and reproduced classed, raced, sexed and gendered understandings and connotations to be found at the intersection of group psychology and evolutionary biology.

We explored how this ‘discourse of the vulnerable mind’ was challenged by understandings of crowd behaviour, which came to the foreground following the death of Princess Diana in 1997, and the media coverage, which surrounded this. As we argued at the time, the media discourse swung between mass hysteria and people power allowing the surfacing of arguments that challenged this ‘theory of the social’.[[5]](#footnote-5) We explored the place of Princess Diana and her death in the psychological and political project of the so-called ‘civilization of the masses’ opening to alternative ways to understand the actions of ‘ordinary people’ following her death that were framed initially by the press and broadcast media as examples of mindless ‘mass hysteria’. This commentary demonstrated how the spontaneous actions of so-called ‘ordinary people’ lay beyond the comprehension of many of the broadsheet and intellectual commentators. As we argued,

many commentators had failed to engage with what the lives of ordinary people had been like except to comment on the new media communities of soaps or the absence of sociality. Indeed, the problem goes further than this. The form assumed by any revolution, uprising or mass movement from below is always a surprise and cannot be contained within pre-existing discourses. Psychological and sociological discourse cannot contemplate ordinary people as agents of transformation, expect in and through a theory of government and hierarchical leadership that privileges political action and whose inverse is the hysterical mob that does not know what it is doing. In these traditions discourses, social change is always described as political transformation. These theories of the social in which the state has a central place contain an implicit notion of hierarchically ordered sociality, a notion of ordinary people as disempowered, and a notion of ordinary people as irrational. Hence crowd emotions, unorthodox spirituality and the spontaneous actions of ordinary people are forever pathologised. (2001: 188–9).

If the civilizing project of liberal democracy was to produce a rational subject capable of accepting the moral and political order, a self-governing citizen, we argued that the production of a rational autonomous subject was central to that project. What has been practiced since at least the nineteenth century is a project through which the animal, instinctual subject, the subject of the masses, is to be remade as a subject capable of understanding, judging and amending his or her own psychology, one indeed who can understand the need for self-transformation as a key issue in both self-improvement and managing the exigencies of daily life. Becoming a psychological subject is not a simple human accomplishment but a struggle in which the push to become an autonomous being is managed and regulated, pathologizing other characteristics, such as the capacity for suggestion, contagion and imitation, through which difficult lives are lived but which exist in the margins of modern life. That those characteristics mix together to produce a rebellion of the damned is hardly surprising when we read the capacity for what I have called ‘ordinary suggestibility’ in this way (see Blackman, 2007).

**Cultural invitation**

With this in mind I want to return to the main aim of this chapter, which is to open up a question raised by Stengers; ‘But above all, what do we really know about this suggestion that we are supposed to avoid’? I want to consider her invitation to change the question; not to ask what suggestion *is*, as if there is some pre-existing transcultural and transhistorical object, which we can uncover, disclose, reveal and so forth. Rather she invites us to ask what suggestion can *do* in all its diverse modalities? This is a more relevant and interesting proposition, which points towards the need for more speculative science within this area. In my book, *Haunted Data: Transmedia, Affect, Weird Science,* I explore the need for such a science and the important unification that could be drawn from existing genealogical work exploring suggestion, contagion and imitation (see Leys, Borch, Orr, for example), as well as work on suggestion, contagion and imitation that is more explicitly situated within the field of affect studies.

I argue that this research helps to point towards the foreclosures, anomalies, epistemic uncertainties, gaps, absences and silences in relation to suggestion and what suggestion might become. This work is extended through focusing specifically on two science controversies that deal with suggestive phenomena, including priming and precognition that return or re-move earlier historical controversies that are far from settled. The first controversy, ‘the John Bargh priming controversy’ is taken to demonstrate how people can be made to move by experimental apparatuses, which are consolidations, subtractions and intensifications of the supposed everyday ways in which we are open to being affected and affecting others. Priming techniques are seen to operate within registers below the threshold of conscious attention and awareness and to bring about change in thought, feeling, belief, action and perception, for example.

The second controversy, which has come to be known as the ‘Feeling the Future controversy’ concerns precognition; the capacity of the future to retroactively shape the past and present. It is associated with a series of beguiling experiments carried out by the Cornell cognitive scientist Daryl Bem exploring phenomena associated with extra-sensory perception.

Through a novel analysis of the data that are shaped as both controversies move across different digital platforms, including blogs, twitter, websites, google+ documents and related mediums, I explore the value of this data for providing leads to what became historically submerged, displaced and disqualified. The analysis is made possible by the digital disruption of science publishing and the emergence of what has become known as post-publication-peer-review (also see Blackman, 2016b).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The book draws inspiration from the work of the German microbiologist and philosopher, Hans Jorg Rheinberger who until his retirement was based at the Max Planck Institute in Berlin. His work, like many feminist science studies scholars (Haraway, Barad, Franklin, for example) has produced new objects, entities, methods and ways of thinking at the intersection of science and philosophy. His work was very influenced by Derrida, Haraway, Bachelard, Foucault and Canguilhem, for example. His philosophy of experimental practice is one that has many shared ontologies with those taken up within anthropology, sociology and literary studies (those which foreground process, enaction and relationality, for example) and is what Lenoir (2010: xii) refers to as an ‘exercise in historical epistemology’.

His approach and historical method present a critique of scientific positivism and explore the entanglement of science, the technical and cultural in the production of scientific objects and entities, or what we might term, following Karen Barad (2007), phenomena. Phenomena are akin to what Rheinberger terms ‘epistemic things’. Rheinberger's approach foregrounds recursion or patterns of repetition and difference that underpin both the invention of new scientific objects, but also the epistemological foreclosure of specific materialized interpretations. Scientific objects are always mediated and become an agent in ‘the process of making knowledge’ (Lenoir, 2010: xiii). They are part of ‘experimental systems’ or apparatuses that are performative; they invent rather than discover. However, the processes of what becomes stabilized are always haunted for Rheinberger in terms of displaced and suppressed narratives, which always threaten to surface and come back; they exist as traces or deferrals in the Derridean sense (see Derrida, 1995).

Although science controversies might be considered settled at particular times, Rheinberger (1994) shows how they have the tendency to resurface in new ways and forms. This is something he cogently shows when following the controversies surrounding chicken tumor agents within oncology *across time*. This is what Rheinberger (1994) following Derrida refers to as the historical movement of a trace (its haunting perhaps), the tension between persistence and transformation. He argues this process is not captured by Kuhn’s (1962) more totalizing notion of a paradigm and a paradigm shift to understand change and transformation within science. Experimental systems are haunted by traces of the past, and these traces, those ‘half-private, half public conjurations’ (Derrida, 1995: 57) also open to what Derrida termed ‘archives of the future’; those lost-futures of science or science-yet-to-come.

Rheinberger’s influence by Derrida is most telling in the neologisms that he constructs as heuristics, which shape his approach to science and scientific forms of experimentation. This includes the concept of *historiality*, which draws attention to the multiplicity of times that intrude within experimental systems. The concept also draws attention to science as a story-telling machine, where as he argues; ‘an experimental system has *more stories* to tell than the experimenter at any given moment is trying to tell with it’ (Rheinberger, 1994: 77). He equates this dynamic potential to older narratives that persist in the future, as well as ‘fragments of narratives that have not yet been told’ (1994: 77).

His argument shows how there are many more stories to be told about what it might mean to enter into suggestive relations that can be mined and put into circulation. They are currently foreclosed by some of the historical beliefs and assumptions we have inherited, particularly from the psychological sciences, as I have illustrated. I would argue that this approach invites a more *inventive* approach to experimentation and suggestion, the precursors of which can be found in earlier psychological experiments into suggestion, which have largely been discarded and consigned to history.

**Suggestion and future psychology**

In previous writing I have explored such an archive of experimentation arguing that it reveals what suggestion might *do* or becomein some of its diverse modalities. It also reveals the contingency of the historical *apriori* that structure contemporary psychological and neuroscientific experiments into suggestion and automaticity. As we have seen the assumption made is that suggestion should be involuntary and effortless (see Blackman, 2014a).

The problematic of suggestion and what suggestion could and might become within different modalities of experimentation requires the shaping of a post-psychological project that takes ‘psychological processes’ out of a distinctly human sensory apparatus; i.e. suggestion is not merely a personality trait that can be indexed and measured. The approaches I have been influenced by all assume what Bernard Stiegler, 1998) has called the fundamental technicity of the human (Stiegler, 1998). Within studies of such fundamental technicity it is assumed that the human and technics are co-constituent processes entering into co-enactive and co-evolving relationships. These relationships always-already involve technical mediation.

Important to the approach I am trying to develop is an engagement with *inventive* experimentation as a creative *and* critical practice that enacts, rather than discloses, entities which pre-exist technical and historical processes. One fundamental rethinking of suggestion as a generative principle of mediation made possible by this work is that suggestion is always technical. We cannot talk about general psychical influences as suggestive, unless we can also take into account the technical practices and processes that allow suggestive processes to take form. Suggestion is therefore not a noun, referring to some abstract process, but rather suggestion is always technical, and part of an associated milieu (Venn, 2010). We can find these insights in the past of psychology and psychoanalysis, as well as in process philosophy and vitalism. These are all areas, which provide important ways of recasting the question of what it might and could mean to ‘pay attention’ differently and to enter into suggestive relations with another, human and non-human.

If my argument convinces, then any discussion of the inventiveness of experimental or aesthetic devices, objects, entities and technologies, requires attention to what and how subject's *become available* to be articulated by and through practices. This might require working with and against particular ‘habits of attention’, thus re-positioning inventive practices as forms of experimental stagecraft requiring ingenuity, hard work, training, discipline and attention to creative process. Let me outline some examples to illustrate what might be at stake.

My argument can be best illustrated by a series of experiments carried out at William James’s Harvard Psychological Laboratory by Leon Solomons and Gertrude Stein in the late nineteenth century (1896). I have written about these experiments in other contexts (see Blackman, 2014a; 2014b), and how they act as an interesting precursor to contemporary discussions of the performativity, efficacy and potential of devices, technologies and settings to bring about change and transformation. In this last section I will focus specifically on the experiments with automatic reading, rather than writing (which I have focused on elsewhere; see Blackman, 2014a; 2014b).

Solomons and Stein experimented with the phenomena of automatic writing and automatic reading. In their experiments with automatic writing, which I have discussed in an article published in the journal *Subjectivity*, they experimented with a specific device known as a planchette. This device is associated more with psychic research and the phenomena of automatic writing and with spiritualist settings and mediumship, although it has also caught the attention and imaginations of many artists, including Susan Hiller, for example. Part of the milieu or background to these experiments was hysteria and the experiences of secondary or double personality experienced by many women that had been documented usually by those men who were studying them. Hysteria at that time was considered a peculiar form of distinctly female psychopathology. Solomons and Stein did not start with the presumption of psychopathology but wanted to see if they could model what were taken to be the ‘secondary personalities’ of hysterics through the use of the planchette. They were interested in what they termed capacities and habits of attention and how these might be done and *undone* within particular experimental settings.

Experimentation in this context was organised through a more creative analytics based on process philosophy and particularly radical empiricism (see Blackman, 2014a). It was more proto-performative and speculative rather than designed to confirm or disclose truths. The social technology and *apriori* of the setting was oriented to the capacity of the experimental apparatus to attune to such habits and capacities and produce transformations. In *Immaterial Bodies* (Blackman, 2012) I have argued that attention was approached as a threshold experience that could be actualized in different ways depending on the efficacy of the setting - this included various devices and the training, discipline and perhaps the ‘interest’ of the experimental subject. They were working against what Solomons and Stein called habits of attention; those local theories of mind, consciousness, matter etc. which shape perception, sensation and attention; what anthropologists would later call ‘cultural invitation’. The main assumption that remains throughout science, and particularly the psychological sciences today as we have seen, is that suggestion should be experienced as involuntary and effortless – i.e., it does not require work, training, ingenuity, discipline etc**.**

What can we learn by returning to Solomons and Stein’s experiments with automaticity framed as doing and *un*doing particular habits of attention?

I will focus on one of the series of experiments, which explored what they termed ‘automatic reading’. Automatic reading was actualized via an apparatus, which consisted of the experimental subject reading a novel aloud to herself (in a low voice) whilst an operator reads another story. It is important that the first story or novel is uninteresting and the second that the operator reads is more interesting or exciting (this is usually discussed by Solomons and Stein as being due to the emotional intensity and valence of the stories). After a number of trials they suggest that it becomes possible for the subject to read aloud whilst focusing on and listening to the second story. They argue that, ‘the reading becomes completely unconscious for periods of as much as a page’ (Solomons and Stein, 1896: 503). At best the subject’s own voice will be experienced as a confused murmur. This is experienced as a background of meaningless sound or as a blank; as moments of unconsciousness. The reading is also usually rather monotonous. At certain thresholds the subject would experience their own voice as an extra-personality, where their own voice was experienced as ‘not-me’; ‘his [sic] voice seemed as if that of another person’ (Solomons and Stein, 1896: 504). These experiments were working with and against particular habits of attention (the absorption of reading a novel for example) in order to see what it might be possible to actualize within particular settings.

It would seem to me that these experiments with their focus on particular devices, in this case the novel, voices and different thresholds of sound, foreground the importance of the embodied capacities of the subject to enter into and transform the setting. Stein with the help of a particular apparatus was able to pay attention in different ways such that she could experience her own voice as extra-personal. How she paid attention was a technical matter and one that challenged concepts of will and conscious rationality. This was about creating the settings through which a process might ‘become available’ as the basis of transformative experience. Solomons and Stein worked with subjectivity as a transitive process (never distinctly human), which disrupted boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness, mind and body, attention and distraction, material and immaterial and will and habit.

The concept of ‘availability’ has also been developed in work inspired by the writings of Gabriel Tarde (see Candea, 2010). I develop this concept within an article published in the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* – in a special issue on Affect and Relationality (see Blackman, 2016a). I have used the concept of ‘availability’ to explore my own embodied responses to an exhibition at the Foundling Museum in London. I argue that this concept is useful for thinking about how exhibitions, museums or gallery spaces might operate affectively. On that basis I explore why foregrounding those experiences and phenomena that have historically been sidelined within understandings of sense making, including suggestion, automaticity and voice hearing, might open the arts up to inventive practices that extend how we approach perception, attention and meaning making within and through art practices.

I develop arguments put forward by Helene Ratner (2009) published in the journal *Distinktion*. She argues following the work of Gabriel Tarde, that suggestion is the basic mechanism of social-psychological life. Engaging with the ontology of subjectivity presumed within Tarde’s work, what is seen to define subjectivity is the capacity to affect and be affected. As I have argued elsewhere, for this reason, Tarde’s psychology has been considered an inter- rather than intra-psychology (Blackman, 2007). Tarde also argued that ‘suggested ideas, beliefs and desires form the basis for often non-conscious but also voluntary action’ (Ratner, 2009: 106). However, Ratner argues it is not that suggestive processes operate merely between human subjects, but that *objects* can also be suggestive. However, she also argues that not *all* objects are suggestive. The ‘suggestive object facilitates an emotional transformation. Suggestive objects evoke emotions, passions, beliefs and attachments’ (2009: 112). As she goes on to argue, ‘we do not know in advance which objects are suggestive or which subjects experience their suggestion’ (2009: 114).

In understanding what becomes suggestive Ratner also seeks to break down or dissolve the distinction between object and subject and cognition and affect. It is a process she argues of understanding and investigating how ‘objects become suggestive while subjects learn to become affected by the suggestive objects’ (2009: 114). Ratner also draws on Vincianne Despret’s notion of ‘availability’ (2008), where availability refers to the way in which subjects and objects become reassembled in an emotional articulation. Objects can only be suggestive if there are bodies that are more or less available to objects. Thus availability importantly has to include some kind of emotional transformation and can take on a conscious and non-conscious form. This takes our methodological inquiry beyond the ‘speaking subject’ and requires the innovation and development of experimental and aesthetic practices that can disclose, shape, actualize and experiment inventively with these potentialities. When we consider the body’s potential for mediation within this context, we need to consider the ‘total participation’ of the body’s potential for mediation which cannot be reduced to the affective, cognitive, neurological, physiological or somatic; this is what I call *transsubjectivities;* processes that are never contained or defined by the singular distinctly human body. The traces in these experiments reveal what suggestion could be or might become and open up to what I am calling a ‘Future Psychology’ based on a more speculative approach to science.

**Conclusion**

As a family member it was always difficult to separate my own thoughts and feelings from the complex relational dynamics I grew up with. As I often say I felt I got to know much more about my Mother and Father and their own lives and unspoken autobiographies when we were living shared dynamics that brought us to the attention of the school, legal system, welfare and hospital. I became fascinated by the kinds of experiences and phenomena that psychiatry and psychology refer to as ‘passivity or dissociative phenomena’ or as signs and symptoms of disease and illness. I read everything in the local library on psychiatry and psychology in relation to suggestion and voice hearing (and the relations articulated between them) and the deficit model left me frightened, cold, anxious and fearful. There had to be other explanations and I comforted myself with a search that has continued throughout my academic career. This search has taken in the psychological sciences and the openings made possible by critical, discursive and feminist psychologies in the late eighties and early nineties; philosophy and critical historiographies of science, and latterly the field of body studies, sociology, affect studies, and media and cultural theory.

I was and have never been willing or ready to accept that suggestion, contagion and imitation should be understood primarily as a loss of self-control, as a sign that the primitive and animal have not been successfully renounced, as the intrusion of the irrational, or many of the other associations that have been acquired within and outside the psychological sciences. My own response to this has been to try and shape, invent and search for what I am calling a *Future Psychology*; a psychology that is attentive and oriented to psychological processes as fundamentally relational, indeterminate, and entangled in complex ways with material, immaterial, symbolic, technical, historical, cultural and political practices, objects and entities. It is an approach that can be found in traces of psychology's many pasts that resurface and return within science controversies when followed across *time.* In conclusion I am of the strong belief, that despite everything, modernity does not have the measure of the subject. In this context it is apposite to finish with a quote from Stengers to remind us of the historical legacies we are confronting: ‘isn’t it ridiculous that with respect to the phenomenon of hypnosis, whose enigmatic character Freud has always recognised, we are still at the level of invoking Hitler, drugs or the music hall’ (1997: 106).

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1. ‘Weird science’ is a broad term, which captures all manner of sciences of oddities, exceptions and anomalies. It is a term often used to refer to phenomena, practices, experiences and entities, which have been associated or linked with the paranormal or supernatural. As a field it refers to science, which concerns itself with unexplained mysteries, oddities, ‘strange stuff’ or challenges to established thinking. This might include the area of anomalous psychology, or the 'psychology of anomalous experience', formerly known as parapsychology. This sub-discipline of psychology aligns a diverse range of phenomena and experiences, including mediumship, electronic voice phenomena, magical beliefs, lucid dreaming, deathbed visions, miracle cures, paranormal beliefs, false memory, telepathy, near-death states, haunted experiences, suggestion, hypnosis, the placebo effect and so forth. It is framed as a study of extraordinary or exceptional phenomena, but is not restricted to those experiences, which might be delineated as paranormal. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This quote is taken from Ruth Leys’ (2011) important critique of affect theory that was published in *Critical Inquiry.* Although she is sympathetic to such a move she is also critical of the current assumption that affect is independent or autonomous from meaning and signification. Also see her book *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04vf36p (accessed 1 May 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See for example the writings of Stanley Hall (1904) the evolutionary psychologist famous for inventing the concept of adolescence. He drew on evolutionary psychology, including the work of the French Royalist Gustave Le Bon (1922) to make the argument that certain people were closer to the animal and primitive and less able to renounce suggestion on what he conceived as a developmental path to autonomy and self-control. In his writings he positioned women, children and colonial subjects as closer to the animal and more susceptible to what he conceived as dangerous rhythms of modern industrial life (including the factory and particular forms of music, such as swing and jazz). His work was symptomatic of the racist colonial imaginary that psychology as a knowledge practice became part of and helped to inscribe within strategies of population management. However, the vestiges of this thinking still haunt contemporary psychology and the way it attempts to understand collective behavior and mass psychology (see Blackman, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Examples of behavior and practices which were specified as example of ‘mass hysteria’ included the widespread mourning and collective rituals such as leaving flowers at the gates of Buckingham Palace and Kensington Palace, which followed Princess Diana’s death. As many people commented: ‘I didn’t believe in her, so why do I feel this grief?’ People talked about Diana as if they had lost a friend, inaugurating the title, the ‘People’s Princess’. The invocation of mass hysteria, understood as the renouncement of rationality and control, became one way in which the press and broadcast media attempted to find an explanation for the unmagnified expressions of sorrow (see Blackman, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Post-publication-peer-review (PPPR) is a distributed form of commentary made possible by social and digital media, which allow different publics to add their own commentary to published academic journal articles as they circulate across websites, blogs and weblogs, twitter, Google+ posts, in Reddit communities, in comments attached to Wikipedia, online science journalism articles, newspaper articles and so on. For some scientists, the digital disruption of the publishing industry is opening scientific conversation up to new publics and can help contribute to the impact of the article. For others it is dangerous and might damage the integrity of science and the concepts used to adjudicate truth-claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)