Social Mindscapes

An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology

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/ Preface

My interest in studying cognition goes back to 1970, when I first read about human perception in a social psychology class in college. Though immediately fascinated by the topic, I was initially discouraged by my belief that it was not something that I would ever be able to study as a sociologist. The possibility of integrating my interests in the social and the mental became somewhat clearer a year later, when I read Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* and discovered the existence of a "sociology of knowledge." Yet it was not until I came to the University of Pennsylvania the following year to study with Erving Goffman, who was about to complete *Frame Analysis,* that I got my first close look at what a sociology of thinking might look like.

As a researcher, I first approached the mind through my work in the sociology of time on social frameworks of temporal reference, the temporal differentiation of the sacred from the profane, and the role of calendars in collective memory. At the same time, as a teacher, I found myself launching a far more ambitious project of trying to develop a general sociological framework for dealing with cognitive matters. In 1980 I introduced for the first time (at the University of Pittsburgh) a course titled "Cognitive Sociology," with which I have kept experimenting ever since then at Columbia University, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and for the last eight years at Rutgers University. Only in 1987, however, did I begin to seriously consider writing a comprehensive introduction to this field, and only in 1993 did I finally decide to do so, a decision

greatly inspired by some encouraging suggestions from both Sherry Turkle and my soon-to-be-editor Michael Aronson.

A number of people deserve an acknowledgment of appreciation for their considerable efforts in helping me make this book better than it would have been without them. I owe special thanks to my colleagues Karen Cerulo and Richard Williams as well as to my students Lisa Bonchek, Wayne Brekhus, Johanna Foster, and Ruth Simpson for taking the time to read and give me some very useful comments on an early draft of the manuscript. I also benefited tremendously from extensive feedback I got from my former student Christena Nippert-Eng, whose own *Home and Work* is an excellent example of a successful attempt to produce a cognitive sociology of everyday life.

Three colleagues and friends deserve a special acknowledgment for the great help they offered me as I was writing this book. Murray Davis, a true intellectual soulmate, is one of the very few fellow travelers I have met over the past twenty years in the rather lonely world of the sociology of the mind, and his excellent feedback on the manuscript was particularly helpful. Kathleen Gerson has shared many of my ups and downs while working on the book, and her extremely careful reading of the manuscript was a rare token of friendship as well as an author's dream come true. As one of the very few sociologists who appreciate the need to bring sociology and cognitive science closer together, Paul DiMaggio was a third ideal reader, and his comments on the manuscript were the most extensive intellectual feedback I have ever received.

A final word of deep appreciation and gratitude to my wife and friend-for-life, Yael, for the excellent feedback she has given me throughout the three years of working on this book. More important, she has continuously provided me with personal and intellectual encouragement and support for the twenty-three years of preparing for it. I shall always treasure her unfailing faith in me throughout this time.

It is not men in general who think, or even isolated individuals who do the thinking, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought . . . Strictly speaking it is incorrect to say that the single individual thinks. Rather it is more correct to insist that he participates in thinking further what other men have thought before him.

Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*

/ Contents

1 /

The Sociology of the Mind

Why do we eat sardines yet never goldfish, ducks yet never parrots? Why does adding cheese make a hamburger a "cheeseburger" whereas adding ketchup does not make it a "ketchupburger"?[1] And why are Frenchmen less likely than Americans to find snails revolting? By the same token, how do we come to regard gold as more precious than water? How do we figure out which of the things that are said at a meeting ought to be included in the minutes and which ones are to be considered "off the record" and officially ignored? And how do we come to "remember" things that happened long before we were born?

In its present state, cognitive science cannot provide answers to any of these questions. In order to even address them, we may very well need an altogether new vision of "the mind."

When we think about thinking, we usually envision an individual thinker—a chess player analyzing his opponent's last move, a scientist designing an experiment, an old man reminiscing about his childhood, a young girl trying to solve a mathematical problem. This vision, so powerfully captured by Auguste Rodin in his statue *The Thinker,* is a typical product of modern Western civilization, which practically invented individualism. Since the late seventeenth century, it has been bolstered by the "empiricist" theories of

knowledge developed by the British philosophers John Locke and George Berkeley, who posited a blank mind, a *tabula rasa,* upon which the world impresses itself through our senses.

Yet while *cognitive individualism*[2] still dominates the popular vision of thinking, modern scholarship strongly rejects such a highly personalized view of the mind. Aside from some small pockets of individualistic resistance in philosophy, economics, and psychoanalysis, few students of the mind today base their general vision of thinking on the image of a solitary thinker whose thoughts are a product of his or her own unique personal experience and idiosyncratic outlook on the world. In fact, if scientists were to study idiosyncratic thought patterns that apply only to particular individuals, we probably would not even consider their findings "scientific."

The rise of modern cognitive science[3] coincides with the decline of the Romantic vision of the individual thinker and a growing interest in the non-personal foundations of our thinking. Inspired by René Descartes's and Immanuel Kant's "rationalist" visions of innate mental faculties that precede our sensory experience of the world and even condition the way we actually organize it in our heads, most cognitive scientists today reject Locke's and Berkeley's visions of an a priori empty mind.[4] The move away from empiricism toward rationalism has placed reason instead of experience at the heart of the process we call "thinking." More important, however, it has also meant substituting the human for the individual as the primary locus of cognition.

It is hard not to notice the dramatic shift of attention from the idiosyncratic to the universal in the modern study of the mind. It is our cognitive commonality as human beings, rather than our uniqueness as individual thinkers, that is at the center of the study of cognition today, and modern theories of the mind typically play down our cognitive idiosyncrasies, highlighting instead what we share in common. As evident from the fact that the theoretical agendas of Noam Chomsky and Jean Piaget still dominate much of modern linguistics and developmental psychology, this trend is most

visibly epitomized in the current interest in the common constitution of our verbal apparatus as well as the seemingly universal process of our cognitive development.

Cognitive universalism is clearly the dominant vision of the mind in modern cognitive science, much of which revolves around the search for the universal foundations of human cognition. Even psychologists, philosophers, linguists, and students of artificial intelligence who do not study the brain itself nonetheless claim to explore the way humans think. As evident from their general indifference to their research subjects' biographical background, most cognitive scientists today assume a universal, *human* mind.

It is certainly such universalistic sensitivity that allows cognitive scientists to unravel the universal foundations of human cognition. It is precisely their concern with our cognitive commonality that has helped neuroscientists, psychologists, linguists, and students of artificial intelligence to discover universal patterns in the way we form concepts, process information, activate mental "schemas," make decisions, solve problems, generate meaningful sentences from "deep" syntactic structures, access our memory, and move through the various stages of our cognitive development. Yet it is precisely this commitment to cognitive universalism that is also responsible for what is probably cognitive science's most serious limitation. While it certainly helps cognitive scientists produce a remarkably detailed picture of how we are cognitively "hard wired," it also prevents them from addressing the unmistakably non-universal mental "software" we use when we think.

Thus, their almost exclusive concern with our cognitive commonality *as human beings* prevents cognitive scientists from even addressing major cognitive differences that do not result from any fundamental biological differences such as those between normal adults and children, the brain damaged, the senile, or the mentally retarded. This presents the modern science of the mind with a very serious problem since, unlike the way we typically contrast human

and animal (or adult and infant) cognition, we certainly cannot attribute the difference between the ancient Roman and present-day Italian visions of the universe (or between the ways liberals and conservatives view art), for example, to any major difference in their genetic makeup or the physiology of their brains.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that some rather critical aspects of our thinking are still largely ignored by cognitive science. After all, with the exception of cultural anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists, most modern students of the mind tend to ignore differences in the way we think—differences not only among individuals but also among different cultures, social groups, and historical periods. As a result, few cognitive scientists today would even consider addressing, for example, the difference between the ways in which gender is conceptualized in California and in Yemen, in which Catholics and Buddhists (or peasants and academics) envision God, or in which most Europeans viewed disease in the early thirteenth century and today. Nor, for that matter, can they help us understand why we reckon time in terms of hours and weeks and associate doves with peace. Such intellectual blind spots certainly leave us with less than a truly comprehensive science of the mind.

When my daughter was six, we had our first talk about what she should do if anyone ever tried to abduct her. The very next morning she proudly recounted to me a dream she had that night about precisely such an attempt, which in fact failed because she managed to apply the skills I had taught her only the day before. Wasn't she lucky, she added, that she happened to learn those skills just hours before she needed to use them for the first time! I have told this story to many people and discovered that they almost all find it amusing. Yet there was nothing inherently funny about my daughter's remark. In fact, very few people, if any, would have considered it funny only a hundred years ago, prior to the publication of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*,[5] which totally transformed the way we think about our dreams.

At the same time, however, while this should certainly remind us

that the things we find amusing are not inherently (and therefore universally) funny, we should also recognize that what we are seeing here are more than just a bunch of unrelated individuals with some peculiar sense of humor that somehow happens to be shared by most of their contemporaries yet, for some odd reason, by no one older than their grandparents. In a similar vein, when we notice that many Americans find the idea of eating snails revolting, we should recognize that what we are seeing is more than just a random collection of individuals with some peculiar phobia that somehow happens to be shared by so many of their compatriots yet, for some odd reason, by only a few French.

The problem with cognitive science is that, except for work produced by cultural psychologists, cognitive anthropologists, and lately some developmental and social psychologists, it has thus far largely ignored the social dimension of cognition. A truly comprehensive science of the mind must also include a *sociology of thinking*[6] that, by focusing specifically on the *sociomental*,[7] would complement the efforts of psychology, linguistics, the neurosciences, and artificial intelligence to provide a complete picture of how we think.

Despite a long history of almost totally ignoring sociology, cognitive scientists need to be more open to what *cognitive sociology*[8] can offer them. Like the other cognitive sciences, it certainly tries to stay away from our cognitive idiosyncrasies, yet whereas psychology or linguistics dwell almost exclusively on our cognitive commonality as human beings, cognitive sociology also highlights major differences in the way we think. In other words, it tries to explain why our thinking is *similar to as well as different from* the way other people think.

There are three rather distinct levels of analysis one can use for approaching cognition given the fact that we think both (a) as individuals, (b) as social beings, and (c) as human beings. Whereas cognitive individualism naturally addresses only the first of those three levels, cognitive universalism basically confines itself to the third. Each, therefore, is somewhat limited in its scope. In addressing the

middle level, which covers the entire range between thinking as an individual and as a human being (thereby including, for example, thinking as a lawyer, as a German, as a baby boomer, as a Catholic, and as a radical feminist), cognitive sociology thus helps avoid the reductionistic tendencies often associated with either of those two extremes.

Only an integrative approach that addresses *all* three levels, of course, can provide a complete picture of how we think.[9] While cognitive individualism may certainly shed light on the particular mnemonic techniques I use to remember the password to my electronic mail account and cognitive universalism may best explain how I generally store information in my brain, only a *sociology* of memory can possibly account for how I remember the Crimean War. By the same token, whereas in order to understand how we differentiate "figures" from their surrounding "ground" we clearly need a psychology of perception, only a *sociology* of perception can account for a culture's general tendency to perceive children as resembling their mothers more than their fathers.

In highlighting the social aspects of cognition, cognitive sociology reminds us that we think not only as individuals and as human beings, but also as social beings, products of particular social environments that affect as well as constrain the way we cognitively interact with the world.[10] In probing the social underpinnings of the mental, it thus brings to the foreground a largely neglected dimension of our thinking, the full implications of which cognitive science has yet to explicitly address. As such, it should certainly be an indispensable component of a truly comprehensive science of the mind.

Drawing upon a long sociological tradition most illustriously represented by Emile Durkheim, Karl Mannheim, George Herbert Mead, and Alfred Schutz, cognitive sociology recognizes the fact that we do not think just as individuals. Like the other cognitive sciences, it strongly rejects the extreme individualistic vision of the absolutely original solitary thinker, reminding me, for example, that it is not as

an individual but as a product of a particular social environment that I dismiss the fundamentalist account of the current AIDS epidemic as sheer nonsense, and that if my ten-year-old son already knows that the earth is round and that the world is made up of atoms it is only because he happens to live in the twentieth century. It also helps remind me that the way I think about death, God, or sex, for example, is remarkably similar to the way so many other twentieth-century Westerners happen to think about those matters.

Recognizing our cognitive commonality entails rejecting the Romantic vision of some "mental Robinson Crusoe" and remembering that even Crusoe, though far from any other Europeans, was actually still thinking and acting in an unmistakably eighteenth-century British manner. It also entails abandoning Locke's and Berkeley's cognitive empiricism and realizing that perceiving works of art as "Postimpressionist" or "primitive" has very little to do with our senses and everything to do with the impersonal, social categories into which we typically force our personal experience. Furthermore, it means noticing that we also think about a lot of things that we have not experienced personally. Engraved in my mind are not only sensory impressions of the letters I now see on my computer screen and the sound of my printer, but also the ideas of Darwin and Rousseau, whom I will never meet, as well as memories of the voyages of Columbus and Verrazano, which took place more than four hundred years before I was born. In short, I experience the world not only personally, through my own senses, but also *impersonally,* through my mental membership in various social communities.

Most of this, of course, attests to the ubiquitous role of language in our lives. Whereas perception alone would inevitably confine me to a strictly sensory experience of the world, language allows me to process reality conceptually and thereby also bypass my senses. In marked contrast to the absolutely personal nature of sensory perception, language is highly impersonal.[11] When I use words such as "loyalty," "arrogance," "authentic," or "alienated," for example, I am

using unmistakably social ideas which clearly did not originate in my own mind. As Karl Mannheim put it, it is not "isolated individuals who do the thinking, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought . . . Strictly speaking it is incorrect to say that the single individual thinks. Rather it is more correct to insist that he participates in thinking further what other men have thought before him."[12]

Indeed, the impersonal nature of language enables us to transcend our subjectivity and communicate with others.[13] Whereas my senses confine me to my own personal experience, language allows me to convey my thoughts to others as well as to share theirs. It is precisely the impersonal nature of language, therefore, that allows any true "meeting of the minds."

The transcendence of subjectivity and the social construction of *intersubjectivity*[14] help define the distinctive scope and focus of the sociology of the mind. Essentially rejecting cognitive individualism, cognitive sociology ignores the inner, personal world of individuals, basically confining itself to the impersonal social mindscapes we *share in common.*[15]

Such "mindscapes," however, are by no means universal. What we cognitively share in common we do not only as human beings but also as social beings—as Hungarians, as vegetarians, as photographers, as Methodists.

As we try to avoid the strictly personal, we need to be careful not to equate the impersonal with the universal. In other words, when rejecting cognitive individualism, we need not go all the way to the other extreme and replace it by cognitive universalism. While some aspects of our thinking are indeed either purely personal or absolutely universal, many others are neither.

Approaching cognition from an intermediate perspective that complements yet avoids the extremist stances offered by cognitive individualism and universalism, cognitive sociology keeps reminding us that while we certainly think both as individuals and as

human beings, what goes on inside our heads is also affected by the particular *thought communities*[16] to which we happen to belong. Such communities—churches, professions, political movements, generations, nations—are clearly larger than the individual yet considerably smaller than the entire human race.

The fact that many of the "mindscapes" we commonly share are not universal also implies that they are neither naturally nor logically inevitable. Indeed, they are quite often utterly *conventional.*

As we try to stay away from the strictly subjective, we need not go all the way to the other extreme and regard everything that is not subjective as therefore necessarily objective. Indeed, we should try to avoid the dangerous epistemological pitfall of reification[17] and refrain from attributing absoluteness and inevitability to what is actually merely conventional. While much of our thinking indeed transcends our subjectivity, it is nevertheless often grounded in our common social experience and not just in our "human nature" or some absolute standard of "reason."[18] After all, it is not naturally inevitable to associate owls with wisdom or to mentally relegate waiters in cocktail parties to the "background." Nor, for that matter, is the common distinction we make between violence on the street and on the football field an inherently "logical" one.

Cognitive sociology helps us avoid the danger of regarding the merely conventional as if it were part of the natural order by specifically highlighting that which is not entirely subjective yet at the same time not entirely objective either. Between the purely subjective inner world of the individual and the absolutely objective physical world "out there" lies an intersubjective, social world that is quite distinct from both of them.[19] Unlike the former, it certainly transcends our subjectivity and can therefore be commonly shared by entire thought communities. At the same time, in marked contrast to the latter, it is neither naturally nor logically inevitable.

This intersubjective, social world is quite distinct from the subjective world of the individual as well as from the objective world of nature and logic. It is a world where time is reckoned according to

neither the sun or the moon nor our own inner sense of duration but, rather, in accordance with standard, conventional time-reckoning systems such as clock time and the calendar. It is a world where the conventional categories into which we force different "types" of books, films, and music are based on neither our own personal sensations nor any objective logical necessity. Such a world, of course, constitutes the distinctive domain of the sociology of the mind.

The epistemological effort to refrain from attributing objectivity to that which is only intersubjective has some important methodological implications. Since the social world is regarded as natural only by those who happen to inhabit it and therefore take it for granted, the more we can gain access to social worlds that are different from the one we have come to regard as a given the more we will be able to recognize the social nature of both.

Thus, in marked contrast to the tendency among most psychologists, philosophers, linguists, and neuroscientists today to focus on our cognitive commonality as human beings, cognitive sociology tries to promote greater awareness of our *cognitive diversity* as social beings. The more we become aware of our *cognitive differences* as members of different thought communities, the less likely we are to follow the common ethnocentric tendency to regard the particular way in which we ourselves happen to process the world in our minds as based on some absolute standard of "logic" or "reason" and, thus, as naturally or logically inevitable.

Just as it resists the Romantic appeal of cognitive individualism by calling attention to the remarkably similar manner in which different individuals actually classify the world, focus their attention, or reckon time, cognitive sociology also challenges the "imperialistic" claims of cognitive universalism by highlighting major differences in the way members of different thought communities perform those mental acts—differences that clearly cannot be attributed only to their cognitive idiosyncrasies as individuals. Its main goal is to show that our cognitive habits are not so different as to be utterly