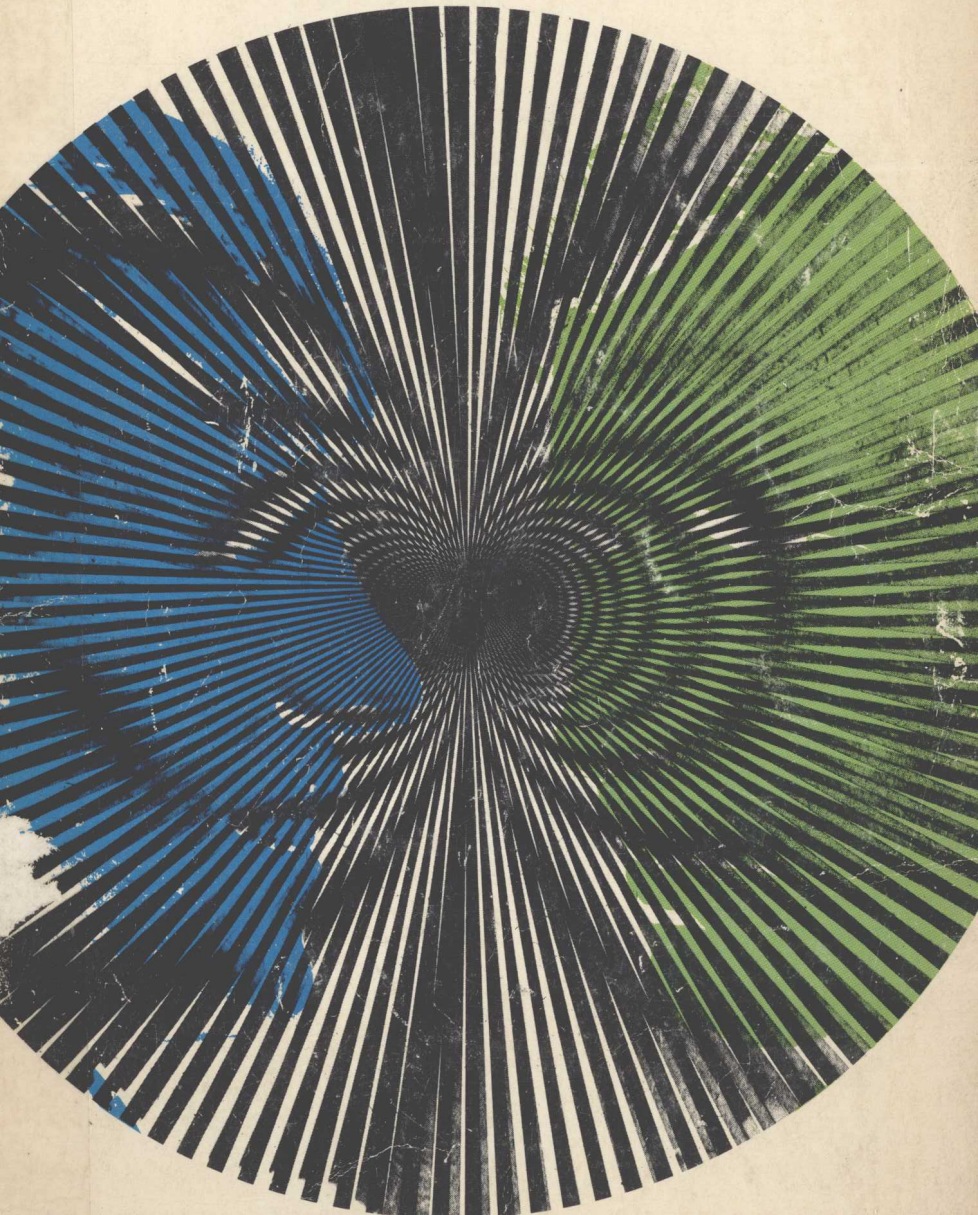
The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations

By Fritz Heider



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FRITZ HEIDER
University of Kansas

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Acknowledgments

As I offer this book in its present form I want to express my gratitude to the people and groups who have helped to make its appearance possible. It is a book that has been germinating over a long period of years. Some of its basic ideas go back to my doctor's dissertation, others have worked their way into print in a number of shorter papers. The integrated approach to this work began about fifteen years ago and at first received only the time that could be given to it during summer vacations and scattered intervals, and the effort of picking up the thread absorbed some of the energies that should have gone into the work itself. As I began to realize how difficult it would be to finish it under these conditions, the question of securing a grant to give myself a longer period of uninterrupted time arose. But because it involved conceptual research rather than a project with a staff of investigators, the question of finding support was not an easy one. Nevertheless, my own feeling was that if the workers in a field do not occasionally take time to sit back and consider the meaning of the concepts they use, the work in that field will lack the direction and the depth that it might have. On this account I am especially grateful for the support I have received.

First, I want to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation which twice, in 1947–48 and in 1951–52, gave me grants that enabled me to free myself for unbroken periods of time to work on the book.

Then, during the year 1956–57 the Behavioral Sciences Division of the Ford Foundation gave the help that brought the book to its present form. Their grant-in-aid supplemented my sabbatical salary from the University of Kansas and made it possible for me to devote another year to the book, and a second grant, also from the Ford Foundation, made available the aid of Dr. Beatrice A. Wright, who worked with me for fifteen months as a collaborator, helping both by criticising and reorganizing the ideas that were contained in the work as it then stood, and by rewriting large parts of it in a way that brings it much closer to the reader. I was extremely fortunate to secure the assistance of someone whose point of view was so sympathetic to that of the book and who possesses a rare combination of power in abstract thinking and psychological understanding. Without this assistance the book would not have been completed for several more years.

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In addition I want to express my thanks to the Administration of the University of Kansas, especially to Dr. John H. Nelson, Dean of the Graduate School, for continued support and encouragement, and for help with the incidental expenses of putting the manuscript into its final form. I am also grateful to the Psychology Advancement Fund of the Department of Psychology of the University of Kansas which provided for having the first draft of the manuscript dittoed in 1953 so that it could be read by colleagues here and elsewhere. Their comments did much to make me feel that it was worthwhile to go on with the work.

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And, like the many who were associated with Kurt Lewin during his working years, I want to pay tribute to his stimulating influence, which has affected much of my thinking and which is still strong even in this book, although it does not derive directly from his work.

To my wife, Grace M. Heider, I owe a special word of gratitude. She gave help and advice at innumerable points in the slow growth of the manuscript and her interest in the book was a constant stimulus.

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FRITZ HEIDER

Lawrence, Kansas
April, 1958

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

IN THE CONTEXT OF THIS BOOK, the term "interpersonal relations" denotes relations between a few, usually between two, people. How one person thinks and feels about another person, how he perceives him and what he does to him, what he expects him to do or think, how he reacts to the actions of the other—these are some of the phenomena that will be treated. Our concern will be with "surface" matters, the events that occur in everyday life on a conscious level, rather than with the unconscious processes studied by psychoanalysis in "depth" psychology. These intuitively understood and "obvious" human relations can, as we shall see, be just as challenging and psychologically significant as the deeper and stranger phenomena.

The discussion will center on the *person* as the basic unit to be investigated. That is to say, the two-person group and its properties as a superindividual unit will not be the focus of attention. Of course, in dealing with the person as a member of a dyad, he cannot be described as a lone subject in an impersonal environment, but must be represented as standing in relation to and interacting with another person. Moreover, the fact that the interrelation is with another person and not an object means that the psychological world of the other person as seen by the subject must enter into the analysis. Generally, a person reacts to what he thinks the other person is perceiving, feeling, and thinking, in addition to what the other person may be doing. In other words, the presumed events inside the other person's skin usually enter as essential features of the relation.

The Lag of Scientific Psychology

Interpersonal relations have commanded man's attention from early times and he has recorded his beliefs about the ways of people in innumerable myths, folk tales, novels, poems, plays, and popular or philosophical essays. That man is curious about human relations, that he has an affinity for such matters and is able to assimilate them, is seen in the fact that his attention is often caught by even an ordinary view of two people talking together or of one person doing something to another. Writers and popularizers have made use of this quality of human nature; the human-interest angle of stories is played up and even atoms are described as if they were people.

Though the full significance of man's relations to man may not be directly evident, the complexity of feelings and actions that can be understood at a glance is surprisingly great. It is for this reason that psychology holds a unique position among the sciences. "Intuitive" knowledge may be remarkably penetrating and can go a long way toward the understanding of human behavior, whereas in the physical sciences such common-sense knowledge is relatively primitive. If we erased all knowledge of scientific physics from our world, not only would we not have cars and television sets and atom bombs, we might even find that the ordinary person was unable to cope with the fundamental mechanical problems of pulleys and levers. On the other hand, if we removed all knowledge of scientific psychology from our world, problems in interpersonal relations might easily be coped with and solved much as before. Man would still "know" how to avoid doing something asked of him, and how to get someone to agree with him; he would still "know" when someone was angry and when someone was pleased. He could even offer sensible explanations for the "whys" of much of his behavior and feelings. In other words, the ordinary person has a great and profound understanding of himself and of other people which, though unformulated or only vaguely conceived, enables him to interact with others in more or less adaptive ways. Köhler (1940), in referring to the lack of great discoveries in psychology as compared with physics, accounts for this by the fact that "man was acquainted with practically all territories of mental life a long time before the founding of scientific psychology" (p. 3).

Paradoxically, with all this natural, intuitive, common-sense capacity to grasp human relations, the science of human relations has been one of the last to develop. Different explanations of this paradox have been suggested. One is that science would destroy the vain and pleasing illusions man has about himself (Krech and Crutchfield, 1948,

p. 6); but one might ask why people have always loved to read the pessimistic, debunking writers from Ecclesiastes to Freud. It has also been proposed that just because we know so much about people intuitively, there has been less incentive for studying them scientifically; why should one develop a theory, carry out systematic observation, or make predictions about the obvious? In any case, the field of human relations with its vast literary documentation but meager scientific treatment is in great contrast to the field of physics in which there are relatively few nonscientific books.

The study of interpersonal relations has been treated only tangentially in the field of personality and social psychology. Personality investigators have been largely concerned with the isolation of personality traits and their patterning in personality structure. Though many personality traits, for example, introversion or extroversion, imply certain characteristic behavior toward other people, the interpersonal behavior itself has not often been a focus of study.

The scientific study of interpersonal relations may be thought of as belonging to social psychology. However, social psychologists have been mainly interested in the relations between people when larger groups play a role. In these cases problems arise that are more conspicuous and of more obvious importance than those that characterize the relations between two people. What determined John's attitude to Jim has not been investigated as thoroughly as John's attitude toward a group or the attitude of the group toward John; persuading another person has been neglected in favor of propaganda directed toward a wider public; and we hear little about conflicts between two people but much about industrial or international conflict. One might ask whether a study of the relations between two people might not throw new light on group problems.

To be sure, in recent times interpersonal relations in the two- or three-person group have more and more engaged the attention of workers in different fields. H. S. Sullivan and the Neo-Freudians in clinical psychology; Mayo, Roethlisberger and Homans in industrial psychology; Cartwright, Festinger, Lippitt, and Newcomb in social psychology; Moreno and Jennings in sociometry—all these and many others treat problems belonging to the psychology of interpersonal relations.

The Approach Used in the Present Study

This book is neither meant to provide an exhaustive survey of the literature and findings in the field of interpersonal relations, nor is it meant to be complete in the treatment of the problems selected. Its

main purpose is to present some considerations that may be helpful in building a conceptual framework suitable to some of the problems in this field.

We could go about this in the Baconian way, that is, by seeking further empirical and experimental facts. We side, however, with those who think that we shall not attain a conceptual framework by collecting more experimental results. Rather, conceptual clarification is a prerequisite for efficient experimentation. Northrop presents a concrete case for this point of view by illustrating what Galilei would have done and achieved had he followed the Baconian way:

> . . . Galilei would have thrown and shot off all kinds of projectiles, carefully observing and describing what happened, gathering more and more detailed empirical information until this information added up to a generalization which was the answer. It is likely that had Galilei done this, he or his successors would still be observing, with the problem unsolved. . . . [Instead Galilei analyzed his problem by] noting the traditional assumptions which generated it. Once this was done, it became evident that his problem centered not in the projectile but in the Aristotelian definition of force, a definition which applied not merely to projectiles but to any motion whatever. (Northrop, 1947, p. 22.)

This discussion must not be construed to mean that experimentation could be dispensed with. Our point is rather that each definite advance in science requires a theoretical analysis and conceptual clarification of the problem. It is our belief that in the field of interpersonal relations we have a great deal of empirical knowledge already, and that we can arrive at systematic understanding and crucial experiments more rapidly by attempting to clarify the theory.

The task of conceptual clarification will be approached from two bases or starting points: We shall make use of the unformulated or half-formulated knowledge of interpersonal relations as it is expressed in our everyday language and experience—this source will be referred to as common-sense or naive psychology; we shall also draw upon the knowledge and insights of scientific investigation and theory in order to make possible a conceptual systematization of the phenomena under study. Such systematization is an important feature of any science and reveals relationships among highly diverse events. Lewin's field-theoretical approach known as topology (Lewin, 1936, 1938) has been in the background of much of the thinking in the present theory of interpersonal relations. Though not many of the specific concepts of topology have been taken over, they have helped in the construction of new ones with which we have tried to represent some of the basic facts of human relations.

Common-Sense Psychology

The study of common-sense psychology is of value for the scientific understanding of interpersonal relations in two ways. First, since common-sense psychology guides our behavior toward other people, it is an essential part of the phenomena in which we are interested. In everyday life we form ideas about other people and about social situations. We interpret other people's actions and we predict what they will do under certain circumstances. Though these ideas are usually not formulated, they often function adequately. They achieve in some measure what a science is supposed to achieve: an adequate description of the subject matter which makes prediction possible. In the same way one talks about a naive physics which consists of the unformulated ways we take account of simple mechanical laws in our adapted actions, one can talk about a "naive psychology" which gives us the principles we use to build up our picture of the social environment and which guides our reactions to it. An explanation of this behavior, therefore, must deal with common-sense psychology regardless of whether its assumptions and principles prove valid under scientific scrutiny. If a person believes that the lines in his palm foretell his future, this belief must be taken into account in explaining certain of his expectations and actions.

Second, the study of common-sense psychology may be of value because of the truths it contains, notwithstanding the fact that many psychologists have mistrusted and even looked down on such unschooled understanding of human behavior. For these psychologists, what one knows intuitively, what one understands through untrained reflection, offers little—at best a superficial and chaotic view of things, at worst a distortion of psychological events. They point, for example, to the many contradictions that are to be found in this body of material, such as antithetical proverbs or contradictions in a person's interpretation of even simple events. But can a scientist accept such contradictions as proof of the worthlessness of common-sense psychology? If we were to do so, then we would also have to reject the scientific approach, for its history is fraught with contradictions among theories, and even among experimental findings. We would have to concur with Skinner who actually draws this conclusion in regard to theory-making in the psychology of learning (Skinner, 1950).

This book defends the opposite point of view, namely, that scientific psychology has a good deal to learn from common-sense psychology. In interpersonal relations, perhaps more than in any other field of knowledge, fruitful concepts and hunches for hypotheses lie dormant

and unformulated in what we know intuitively. Homans (1950) in sociology and Ryle (1949) in philosophy have also given a central place in their disciplines to everyday practice and knowledge concerning human relations. Whitehead, writing as a philosopher, mathematician, and educator, has still further elevated the status of common-sense ideas by according to them an essential place in *all* sciences. He has stated

> . . . science is rooted in what I have just called the whole apparatus of common sense thought. That is the *datum* from which it starts, and to which it must recur. . . . You may polish up common sense, you may contradict it in detail, you may surprise it. But ultimately your whole task is to satisfy it. (Whitehead, 1929, p. 110.)

Oppenheimer, the physicist, has also stated this view with equal firmness:

> . . . all sciences arise as refinement, corrections, and adaptations of common sense. (Oppenheimer, 1956, p. 128.)
> . . . we may well say that all ideas that occur in common sense are fair as starting points, not guaranteed to work but perfectly valid as the material of the analogies with which we start. (p. 134)

Actually, all psychologists use common-sense ideas in their scientific thinking; but they usually do so without analyzing them and making them explicit.

It is also our belief that the insights concerning interpersonal relations embodied in fables, novels, and other literary forms, provide a fertile source of understanding. This belief has been shared by many psychologists. Lewin has said,

> The most complete and concrete descriptions of situations are those which writers such as Dostoevski have given us. These descriptions have attained what the statistical characterizations have most notably lacked, namely, a picture that shows in a definite way how the different facts in an individual's environment are related to each other and to the individual himself. . . . If psychology is to make predictions about behavior, it must try to accomplish this same task by conceptual means. (Lewin, 1936, p. 13.)

Allport (1937), too, thinks that a "still greater treasure for the psychologist lies in the world's store of drama, biographies, poetry, and fiction" (p. 60). Of course, it is clear that the job of the psychologist does not stop with the insights of the creative writer. Allport points out that

> The psychologist . . . has an inescapable interest in the discovery of general principles, of laws of human behavior . . . the literary writer cares primarily for the individual case, leaving to the reader the task of generalizing the insight he gains. (Allport, 1937, p. 61.)

Though this is doubtless true for many writers, one might add that there are also a great number who are interested in revealing the laws of human nature through their characterizations. If we scan any collection of quotations we find a great many general statements concerning human behavior. Many writers would agree with Proust, who says

> . . . it is the feeling for the general which in the future writer automatically selects what is general and can therefore enter into a work of art. For he has listened to the others only when, however mad or foolish they were, by repeating parrot-like what people of like character say, they had thereby become the prophet-birds, the spokesmen for a psychological law. (Proust, 1926, pp. 230–231.)

However, as Allport says, these generalizations are usually debatable. We cannot simply classify them and expect to get a psychology of interpersonal relations.

But if it is true that novelists are able to give descriptions of human behavior that are often more complete and concrete than those of a psychologist, we must assume that there are some valid features in these representations. Though the ultimate evidence on which we base our theories should be gained by scientific methods, we might use common-sense psychology to advantage in the development of hunches and concepts. The veil of obviousness that makes so many insights of intuitive psychology invisible to our scientific eye has to be pierced. The psychologist must first, however, translate the basic outlines of the nonscientific propositions into a language of more use to scientific investigations.

Language as a Conceptual Tool

The fact that we are able to describe ourselves and other people in everyday language means that it embodies much of what we have called naive psychology. This language serves us well, for it has an infinite flexibility and contains a great number of general concepts that symbolize experiences with the physical and social environment. After all, it is ordinary, nonscientific language that has served as the tool for writers in their representations of human behavior. However, this instrument lacks one important feature—a systematic representation —which is ultimately required by science. Ernst Cassirer, who was greatly concerned with the way in which reality is represented in myths, art, literature, and science, writes as follows about language:

> In language we find the first efforts of classification, but these are still uncoordinated. They cannot lead to a true systematization. For the symbols of language themselves have no definite systematic order. Every single

linguistic term has a special "area of meaning." It is, as Gardiner says, "a beam of light, illumining first this portion and then that portion of the field within which the thing, or rather the complex concatenation of things signified by a sentence lies." But all these different beams of light do not have a common focus. They are dispersed and isolated. (Cassirer, 1944, p. 211.)

In other words, though nonscientific language in the hands of a master is unsurpassed for the description of even the most subtle relationships, it lacks the features of a real system. It is true that philology, whose purpose is to ascertain the elements and laws of language, has brought some order into the concepts that language expresses. Relations among words and phrases are indicated by etymological derivations, syntactical groupings and rules, and lists of antonyms and synonyms. But still the relations between terms are only crudely defined and understood. Though we know the meanings of words like "promise," "permit," or "pride" we do not know them in the same way we know the meaning of words like "two" and "four," or of words like "speed" and "acceleration." The words referring to interpersonal relations are like islands separated from each other by impassable channels. We do not know how to reach one from the other, we do not know whether they contain a certain number of basic principles of variation, or basic elements, different combinations of which produce the manifold of qualitative differences. These words have a tantalizing quality; they seem to present important concepts in their full meaning, and yet we cannot quite get hold of these concepts, because so much is hidden.

We can better appreciate this lack of systematic order if we confront representation by language with representation by numbers.

> We cannot speak of single or isolated numbers. The essence of number is always relative, not absolute. A single number is only a single place in a general systematic order . . . Its meaning is defined by the position it occupies in the whole numerical system. . . . We conceive it as a new and powerful symbolism which, for all scientific purposes, is infinitely superior to the symbolism of speech. For what we find here are no longer detached words but terms that proceed according to one and the same fundamental plan and that, therefore, show us a clear and definite structural law. (Cassirer 1944, p. 212.)

Lewin, influenced by Cassirer in this respect, has emphasized again and again the importance of clarifying the systematic relations among the concepts used in scientific discourse. Operational definitions are not sufficient. In an operational definition, the concept is given meaning by the method used in arriving at it, as, for example, defining intelligence as that which is measured by an intelligence test. In

addition, Lewin proposes that a "method of construction" should be used,

> which has been first developed in mathematics itself. To consider qualitatively different geometrical entities (such as, circle, ellipse, parabola) as the product of a certain combination of certain "elements of construction" (such as, points and movements) has since the time of the Greeks been the secret of this method . . . It is able, at the same time, to link and to separate; it does not minimize qualitative differences and still lays open their relation to general quantitative variables. Cassirer (1910) shows how the same method proved to be fruitful in empirical sciences where the "elements of construction" are mathematically described empirical entities (such as, forces, ions, atoms). (Lewin, 1944, pp. 5–6.)

Though the words of conventional language do not reveal their interrelations, this does not mean that there are none. It will be our task to make them manifest through a conceptual analysis. In doing so, we have to be aware of Skinner's warning:

> The important objection to the vernacular in the description of behavior is that many of its terms imply conceptual schemes. I do not mean that a science of behavior is to dispense with a conceptual scheme but that it must not take over without careful consideration the schemes which underly popular speech. The vernacular is clumsy and obese; its terms overlap each other, draw unnecessary or unreal distinction, and are far from being the most convenient in dealing with the data. (Skinner, 1938, p. 7.)

One can agree with Skinner that an uncritical use of the concepts of the vernacular is not advantageous, and still be of the opinion that psychology can learn a great deal from a critical analysis of these concepts and the underlying conceptual schemes.

This, then, will be the purpose of this book: to offer suggestions for the construction of a language that will allow us to represent, if not all, at least a great number of interpersonal relations, discriminated by conventional language in such a way that their place in a general system will become clearer. This task will require identifying and defining some of the underlying concepts and their patterns of combination that characterize interpersonal relations.

We shall find that drawing upon the knowledge and concepts of psychological science will help sharpen and relate these common-sense concepts to each other. Carnap (1953) has referred to this task of redefining old concepts as the problem of *explication;* he points out that making more exact a concept that is used "in a more or less vague way either in every-day language or in an earlier stage of scientific language" is often important in the development of science and mathematics (p. 438).

We do not pretend that the scientific language that we gained in this way is as systematic as the language of physics and mathematics or, in psychology, as the language of topology or of some of the stimulus-response theorists. But we do believe that it is broader and more flexible than these other psychological languages, and at the same time, in spite of its crudeness, sufficiently exact to permit analysis of a wide variety of commonly experienced human interactions, an analysis which will at the same time "link and separate" them.

On the following pages we shall give two examples of this explication of common-sense concepts, one concerning the meaning of words, and one concerning the meaning of situations.

Word Analysis

For reasons already discussed, our search for concepts crucial to the understanding of interpersonal relations will begin with common-sense psychology as expressed by everyday language. The words of the vernacular, to say nothing of combinations of words in sentences and longer units, present such an endless variety of concepts that it is hopeless to study the nature of interpersonal relations by simply classifying them. By careful analysis of language expressions, however, we can attempt to arrive at concepts that will enable us to clarify the implicit relations among words referring to psychological phenomena.

Let us illustrate this thesis by an example of word explication. Consider the following words: *give*, *take*, *receive*, and *keep*. Grammar has prescribed one relationship—they are all transitive verbs, words that refer to some action. A thesaurus of antonyms may note that *take*, *receive*, and *keep* are all opposites of *give*. The dictionary, calling upon such disciplines as etymology and semantics, records their qualitative meaning. But in spite of all this information, their relationships to each other remain quite obscure. Examine the simplest definitions of these terms:

Give—to hand over to another
Take—to gain possession of by putting forth exertion
Receive—to get as a result of delivery
Keep—to retain in one's possession

These words have something to do with the transaction of property. But explicitly what are their interlocking relationships? Just how is it, for example, that *take*, *receive*, and *keep* are all antonyms of *give* without being equivalent to each other? The following chart records the essential underlying concepts that bring these common-sense concepts into an ordered, systematic relationship. These basic concepts