1. Contents

Key concepts that the book either introduces or substantially extends are: the relationship between thought and social organization, cultural idea systems, generative systems, cultural pluralism, meaning, and the experimental method as it applies to ethnology.

We set out the scope of this work, in the first paragraph of the introduction (Chapter 1):

Human beings, as a species, have two outstanding characteristics compared to all other species: the apparently enormous elaboration of our thought through language and symbolism, and the elaboration of our forms of social organization. The obvious question is whether these two characteristics are connected. ... Our view is that they are connected intimately. Thought and social organization are two aspects of the same larger phenomenon, or better the same larger bundle of phenomena. ... [We have separately described different aspects of this bundle]... Here we bring the two streams of analysis together, in what is at once an exposition of the basic structure of the systems of thought that organizations are built upon and, *eo ipso*, an exposition of the organizational basis and origin of human thinking as such. The resulting reconfiguring of questions, answers, and methods, we believe, cannot be described otherwise than as a new science and not a just a new paradigm.

In the next chapter, we set out our theoretical and philosophical framework. Theoretically, one of our major starting points is Kant’s observation that objectivity is not the opposite of subjectivity, but is rather built out of subjectivity. Subjective (merely personal) perceptions can become objective (public, shared) conceptions when the categories of which they are composed are structured in a manner that enables common understanding. For Kant, these objective (or objectifying) categories were noumena, and were of three main types: soul, series, and universe--or more generally selves, sets, and totalities.

We take the position that Kant’s analysis applies to much more than he realized. The cultural idea systems -- sets of mutually inter-defined ideas established in substantially universal consensus in a community, and that are arranged in powerfully generative systems-- work exactly the same way: they enable their users to objectify subjective experience. We develop this idea through what we refer to as empirical formal analysis (illustrated with an elicitation experiment in Chapter 5):
What empirical formal analysis yields, then, are the coherent idea systems constitutive of an organizational or conceptual universe in a community and the logical principles that unify it, that make it coherent and thereby make it objective for its adherents.

We explain the universality of idea systems in both functional and evolutionary terms in Chapter 3. Our argument, which no one has made previously, is that human social organization requires thinking in terms of classes of classes in specifiable and fairly complex ways (which Piaget also describes in his developmental psychology). Once we know what these class relations are, we can look for evidence of their appearance in the archaeological record. We find them in the Upper Paleolithic cave art and associated mobile art objects. We do not find them in the artifacts associated with Neanderthals. So even though we cannot know directly what human organization in the Upper Paleolithic was, we know that they had the conceptual capacity that human social organization as we know it requires. The Neanderthals, on the evidence, did not have this capacity. So this kind of thinking and this kind of social organization is what in all probability literally made us what we are like as a species.

With this background in place, we begin the detailed consideration of the conceptual basis of human social organizations in Chapter 4. Our main focus is on kinship idea systems, which in turn depends on on what has long been called kinship “terminologies.” We mainly focus on kinship due its centrality in human social systems:

Kinship is the gateway to the rest of the systems of social organization because the fundamental conceptual relationships out of which kinship is built are the conceptual materials out of which the rest of social organization is constructed.

We examine kinship in three cultural contexts: Punjabi, American, and Kariera. Punjabi and American English are both Indo-European languages, but Punjab society has been conventionally taken as “traditional” and America as an exceptionally modern. Kariera, in the ethnographic literature, is regarded as one of the quintessentially “primitive” societies.

We show that the same kind of analysis applies to all and can reveal the fundamental kinship structural logic in each (Chapter 6). We also show that underneath the more superficial differences there are fundamental conceptual similarities, and we show how the differences are related to the similarities. To do this, we develop a formal model for the structure of kinship idea systems expressed using concepts from abstract algebras:

The algebraic formalism is not just a translation of already known properties into a symbolic language (such as notation systems for genealogical relations derided by Malinowski as useless “kinship algebra” [Stocking 1986]), but also enables properties that are a consequence of the underlying assumptions to be brought out and identified.
We develop, in detail, a formal theory of the structure of kinship terminology idea systems in Chapter 7 and illustrate that theory through a formal, algebraic analysis of the American kinship terminology. The formal analysis is

... a way to represent the structuring processes inherent in the domain being considered. Here we are dealing with a new subject matter, the idea-systems that form the foundation of human social organization. There can be no formal analysis of any value that does not delineate what these idea-systems are empirically and how they are structured, and conversely delineating what they are empirically also constitutes the reason this type of analysis is needed and lays the basis that enables the formalism to show us properties that go beyond mere re-statement of the facts in hand and provides the means to explain the facts in hand by reference to empirically grounded theory.

The formal analysis makes it possible to express the underlying cultural logic of the American kinship terminology and to make evident the relationship between terminology and genealogy, a central problem in anthropological theorizing since the time of Lewis Henry Morgan.

We continue the argument in Chapters 8 and 9 with a detailed analysis of the Kariera terminology and the relationship between the terminological structure and the form of social organization in the Kariera society. In so doing, we are able to resolve long-standing theoretical issues regarding the relationship between kinship idea systems and what the late French structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, referred to as elementary forms of social organization.

In Chapters 10 and 11 we show how the logic of kinship idea systems compares with the logic of other social idea systems that are used to construct quite different kinds of organizations, as well as how social idea systems in general differ from technical idea systems. Chapter 12 is the concluding chapter.

In short, we think we have answered one of the most important and enduring questions in the history of scholarly enquiry: we have shown, directly, the social basis of thought and the conceptual basis of human society.

2. Implications

The book is a major new kind of extension of Kantian philosophy, as we have already indicated. It has direct implications for developmental psychology in Piaget’s tradition, and for contemporary problems in brain function and neuroanatomy--essentially it explains why we cannot find ideas in the brain in a physiological sense. They aren’t there. They are in the patterns of interaction that the brain gives us the capacity to engage in. Our argument for pluralism has implications for all of the social sciences individually as well as collectively. There are those who assert that they can show how economics, or power, or social control, or personality, or
whatever, is the basis of everything. Others, more modestly, recognize that each has only part of
the picture. Our argument is a powerful advance for the latter view. We not only argue that
society is inherently pluralistic, we show why, both from the point of view of the requirements of
human thought and from the point of view of the requirements of effective systems of
organization.

3. Audience

If we think of an audience in the form of concentric circles, we would begin with
anthropologists, especially social-cultural anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists. Next
would be biological anthropologists with an interest in extending the ideas of Darwinian
evolution to the evolution of culture and cultural systems. These, we hope, will be led to re-think
some of their assumptions. Extending further outward, the book will be of interest to
sociologists, psychologists, cognitive scientists and philosophers concerned with the nature of
human societies. More broadly, it has implications for all the social sciences, as well as
philosophy.

The book is well-suited for graduate classes in theory and/or method. In a good graduate
program, no one assigning a work would think that theory and method can or should be
separated, yet very few works reflect or convey equal attention to both. This book does; it relates
details of field method to precise and extended analyses leading to very far reaching theoretical
conclusions. This alone should give it a high priority for being assigned in such courses.