

The Sociology of the Mind

Eviatar Zerubavel

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

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

intentionally

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 reification¹⁷ 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

intersubjectivity

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

idiosyncratic yet at the same time also not so similar as to be absolutely universal.

Hence the need for a *comparative* approach to cognition²⁰ that would highlight our cognitive diversity as members of different thought communities. Such an approach should contrast the cognitive habits of Austrians and Indonesians, Mormons and Muslims, surgeons and sculptors, college graduates and high-school dropouts in a conscious effort to rid us of the common illusion that we think only as individuals and as human beings.

The clearest evidence of our cognitive diversity as members of different thought communities, of course, is the existence of numerous culturally specific *cognitive traditions*. The striking contrast between traditional Gypsy and Eskimo styles of mental delineation, for example,²¹ certainly reminds us that there is more than just a single natural or "logical" way of classifying the world. Notable differences between Western and Navajo styles of propositional reasoning²² are likewise indicative of our considerable cognitive diversity as members of different cultures.

Drawing on a long philosophical, psychological, and anthropological tradition associated with figures like Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm Wundt, and Benjamin Lee Whorf,²³ cognitive sociology indeed views culture as a major locus of cognition. Furthermore, following in the intellectual footsteps of cultural psychology, it goes beyond even cognitive anthropology in its explicit commitment to a comparative, cross-cultural perspective on cognition.²⁴

Furthermore, in its commitment to examine cognition from a comparative perspective, cognitive sociology also goes beyond cultural psychology in identifying significant non-idiosyncratic cognitive differences within the same culture. Most spectacular, in this regard, are intracultural historical changes in cognition, such as the declining role of religion in French clinical and legal reasoning over the past few centuries or subtle shifts in Americans' attention to individuals' sex, age, and race over the past few decades.²⁵ Indeed, the waxing and waning of both cognitive individualism and cognitive

universalism over the last three hundred years suggests that whether we associate thinking with individuals or with human beings is in itself affected by various social changes in our intellectual climate.

Yet generation-specific cognitive traditions are only one particular instance of the considerable cognitive diversity that exists among different social groups even within the same culture. Consider the profound differences between the way astronomers and mystics envision the universe, for example, or between lawyers' and social workers' general traditions of mental focusing. Indeed, identifying the various *cognitive subcultures* that exist within a given society is one of the most important tasks of cognitive sociology.²⁶

Its particular sensitivity to non-idiosyncratic cognitive differences also leads the sociology of the mind to focus on social discord over cognitive matters. The fact that the very definition of justice, art, or obscenity, for example, is often contested even within the same society helps remind us that the way we happen to organize the world in our minds is neither naturally nor logically inevitable. Just as instructive, in this regard, are *cognitive battles* over contested memories. Such battles are typically between social "camps" rather than simply between individuals, of course, suggesting that they are more than just personal. At the same time, the fact that they even exist helps remind us that the way we happen to process reality in our own minds is by no means universal.

Another striking cognitive difference specifically addressed by the sociology of the mind is the one between ordinary, "normal" thinkers and *cognitive deviants* such as the demented, whom we typically regard as "mentally disturbed" because they focus their attention, frame their experience, classify the world, reckon the time, and reason somewhat differently from the rest of us.²⁷ The existence of cognitive deviance reminds us once again that the way most of us happen to process the world in our minds is neither naturally nor logically inevitable. It also implies the existence of various *cognitive norms*²⁸ that affect as well as constrain the way we think.

Thus, it is social rules of focusing, for example, that lead us to disregard certain aspects of our surroundings as mere "background." By the same token, social rules of remembrance tell us what we should remember and what we may (or even must) forget. Various conventional rules of mental association likewise affect the meaning we come to attribute to things.

Mental acts such as perceiving, attending, and remembering are not just physiologically constrained human acts but also unmistakably social acts bound by specific normative constraints. Ignoring or forgetting something thus often presupposes some social pressure, however tacit, to exclude it from our attention or memory.

Thinking, in short, has an important normative dimension that has thus far been largely ignored by students of the mind yet which cognitive sociology specifically addresses. It is society, after all, that determines what we come to regard as "reasonable" or "nonsensical," and it usually does so by exerting tacit pressure which we rarely even notice unless we try to resist it.²⁹ As a result of such pressure, I come to perceive sounds I hear as "classical" or "popular" and to reckon the time in standard, conventional terms such as "8:32," "Wednesday," "February," and "1995" even when I am all by myself.

Like any other social norm, cognitive norms are something we learn. In other words, we *learn* how to focus our attention, frame our experience, generalize, and reason in a socially appropriate manner.

We likewise learn to see things as similar to or different from one another. After all, whenever we classify things, we always regard only some of the differences among them as significant and ignore others as negligible and therefore irrelevant,³⁰ yet which differences are considered significant is something we learn, and ignoring those that "make no difference" involves tacit social pressure to disregard them despite the fact that we do notice them, just as we learn that in order to find a book in a bookstore we must attend to the first letters of its author's last name while ignoring the color of its cover. Separating the relevant from the irrelevant, as we shall see, is not just a

logical but also a normative matter. We likewise learn to "see" the fine lines separating liberals from conservatives and the edible from the inedible. Like the contours of our celestial constellations, we notice such lines only after we learn that we should expect to find them there! In the same way, we also learn to ignore the moral plight of cockroaches and remember the Crusades.

This brings us to another major cognitive difference of critical importance to the sociology of the mind, namely the difference between children and adults. Unlike adults, young children do not "see" the fine lines separating Serbs from Croats, the normal from the perverse, or the sacred from the profane. As evident from the way they experience Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy,³¹ nor do they notice the conventional mental fences separating the "real" world from the worlds of fiction, fantasy, and play. When my son was three and pretended that he was an eagle, he believed that his eagleness was evident not only to the other children who were playing with him but to all the birds around them as well.

Young children who have not learned yet how to focus their attention in a socially appropriate manner and therefore attend to that which is supposed to be disregarded likewise remind us that ignoring the irrelevant is something we learn to do (like my friend's son, who, on his first visit to the zoo, instead of looking at the animals, kept focusing on the patterns in the chain-link fence surrounding the areas where they were kept).³² A three-year-old boy attending a circus show for the first time cannot "see" the fine line that, to the adults around him, so clearly separates the elephant trainers "in the spotlight" from the attendants who clean after them "in the background." Neither can a three-year-old girl attending her first track meet comprehend why "practice" efforts produced by long jumpers and shot putters are not even measured. Nor, for that matter, can two-year-olds play chess or participate in a real conversation, as they have yet to acquire the ability to jointly share a common focus of attention with others.³³

Yet the difference between children's and adults' cognition has to

do with the fact that they are at rather different stages of their cognitive development not only as human beings but also as social beings. Learning to reckon the time in terms of "seven-thirty," "Wednesday," or "July," for example, is part of the process of becoming social that has nothing to do with our psychocognitive development and everything to do with our *sociocognitive development*.³⁴ That is also true of the process of learning to distinguish the noble from the crude, ignore the "empty" spaces between buildings,³⁵ regard gerbils as pets and mice as pests, use Peter Pan, Robinson Crusoe, and Cinderella as metaphors, and remember Moses, Galileo, and Attila the Hun.

As even developmental psychologists are beginning to recognize (mainly as a result of the growing influence of Lev Vygotsky's radical critique of the classic Piagetian view of how we mentally develop),³⁶ our cognitive development is always situated within a particular social context and constrained by specific social circumstances.³⁷ Rather than a solitary individual developing in a vacuum, the child is essentially a cognitive "apprentice," socially instructed by others.³⁸

It is the process of *cognitive socialization* that allows us to enter the social, intersubjective world. Becoming social implies learning not only how to act but also how to think in a social manner. As we become socialized and learn to see the world through the mental lenses of particular thought communities, we come to assign to objects the same meaning that they have for others around us, to both ignore and remember the same things that they do, and to laugh at the same things that they find funny. Only then do we actually "enter" the social world.

Some of our cognitive socialization is done quite explicitly through formal education, which accounts for the considerable cognitive differences between people with different amounts of formal schooling (not to mention between the literate and the illiterate) even within the same society.³⁹ Yet unlike our moral and behavioral socialization (as manifested in our laws and rules of etiquette),

much of it is also tacit.⁴⁰ When a young boy returns with his mother from a long day downtown and hears her "official" account of what they did and saw there, for example, he is getting a tacit lesson in what is considered relevant (and memorable) and irrelevant (and forgettable). Though it is only implicit, such a lesson is an important part of the process of learning how to attend, as well as how to remember, in a socially appropriate manner.

Consider also the way we learn various conventional distinctions. Such cognitive socialization is sometimes explicit, as when we learn in the classroom the difference between fruits and vegetables or gases and liquids, yet much of it is simply "picked up." By noting that some guests always come to her house as part of a larger group whereas others also come by themselves (or that some of them also eat in her kitchen whereas others eat only in the dining room), a young girl implicitly learns the fine cultural distinctions between formal and informal relations as well as between various degrees of intimacy. In a similar vein, by noting that some things in his apartment are always kept in the bedroom or inside drawers whereas others are conspicuously displayed in the living room or on the wall, a young boy also learns the important social distinction between the private and the public. The presence of special clothes and tableware on holidays likewise helps introduce both of them to the equally elusive cultural distinction between the special and the ordinary.⁴¹

Such tacit socialization is also an inevitable part of the process of learning a language. After all, when young French speakers learn to address some people as *tu* and others as *vous*, they are being implicitly sensitized to the cultural distinction between formal and informal relations. By the same token, learning that hats are considered grammatically masculine whereas suitcases are regarded as feminine also introduces them to gender distinctions in general.

Furthermore, language helps us "typify" the world and thereby transform every novel experience into a somewhat familiar one.⁴² Thus, by downplaying their uniqueness and regarding them as typical members of certain categories, I come to feel that I somehow

know what to expect from a "guest" or a fellow "passenger" whom I have never met. Likewise, whenever I go to a "funeral," a "wedding," or a "job interview," I already have a rough idea of what it will be like.

The fact that we undergo massive cognitive socialization underscores the considerable amount of control society has over what we attend to, how we reason, what we remember, and how we interpret our experiences. Since it is normally taken for granted except when we actively try to resist it, such sociomental control is one of the most insidious forms of social control.

And yet, people in any given social environment are clearly not all cognitive clones of one another, which suggests that the way we think is by no means determined totally by society. Each of us is a member of more than just one thought community⁴³ and therefore inhabits several different social worlds.⁴⁴ As a result, we each have a rather wide "cognitive repertoire" and often think somewhat differently in different social contexts.

Such cognitive diversity happens to be one of the major features of modern life. Indeed, despite the obvious homogenizing effects of television,⁴⁵ advertisement, and popular culture, modern society is characterized by its *cognitive pluralism*.⁴⁶

The roots of modern cognitive pluralism are partly structural. Greater social mobility (as manifested, for example, in considerably higher rates of immigration, intermarriage, and remarriage) inevitably produces modern affiliation patterns that, in marked contrast to the somewhat "monocentric" structure of more traditional social networks,⁴⁷ involve membership in more than just a single social community.⁴⁸ As a result, most people nowadays belong to multiple thought communities.⁴⁹

To appreciate the cognitive implications of such a distinctively modern "web of sociomental affiliations," consider the social structure of our memories. The modern individual is typically situated at the intersection of several quite separate "mnemonic communities"

and there is very little overlap between his or her memories as an American, as a criminal lawyer, and as a *Star Trek* fan. This inevitably diminishes our mnemonic commonality with other individuals. Whereas in a more traditional, "monocentric" social structure individuals' recollections are not that different from those of others (consider, for example, the war memories of different members of the same platoon or submarine), that is rarely the case for most of us today.

This, in fact, may also help explain the considerable appeal and resilience of cognitive individualism. Given that we are socially situated at unique intersections of rather separate thought communities, our cognitive makeup also tends to be unique. As the networks of my social affiliations become more complex, my memories, for example, inevitably become more individuated and, thus, personal. After all, who else besides me also shares the collective memories of such separate mnemonic communities as Rutgers University, the track world, and my wife's family?

Modern cognitive pluralism is also a by-product of the growing structural as well as functional differentiation within modern society. In an increasingly compartmentalized and specialized world, we should not be surprised to also find greater cognitive diversity. As we become both structurally and functionally more different from one another,⁵⁰ we also come to inhabit more specialized thought communities.

In every society there is an element of social differentiation that calls for some specialized forms of cognitive socialization. In modern society, however, where the division of labor is particularly complex, there is also a more complex *cognitive division of labor*.⁵¹ After all, one would not expect an art dealer, a cook, and a travel agent to share the same stock of professional knowledge,⁵² just as one would not expect the cognitive skills of police detectives to resemble those of baseball players or mechanical engineers. In a world where eye and ear doctors may no longer read the same professional journals,

it is hardly surprising that even young children get to choose their own electives at school.

The process of cognitive socialization does not end at the age of six, but continues indefinitely as we keep entering new thought communities. In addition to our basic, "primary" cognitive socialization, where we are inducted into society at large and acquire the knowledge and cognitive skills expected from every single one of its members, we also undergo various forms of "secondary" cognitive socialization, where we acquire the more specialized knowledge and skills that are required in specific sectors within it.⁵³ As a young child, I thus learn to speak, read, and count—"primary" cognitive skills that are expected from practically everyone else around me (yet which may vary from one society to another as well as historically within a given society). Later, however, I acquire the more specific knowledge expected from a librarian (but not from a dentist), the more specialized vocabulary I will need as a food critic (but not as a stock broker), or the particular style of mental focusing required from surgeons (but not from poets).

Yet the roots of modern cognitive pluralism are partly ideological as well. The modern opposition to any form of intellectual hegemony, for example, is directly responsible for the decline of religion's practically monopolistic authority over individuals' cognitive socialization, which has in turn led to a proliferation of widely different "thought styles" that are at considerable odds with one another.⁵⁴ Consider also the distinctively modern rejection of traditionalism, which inevitably reduces our cognitive commonality. After all, in a world where computer software programs are revised almost every other year (in marked contrast to traditional "canonical" texts such as the Vedas or the Bible, which have yet to be fundamentally revised after a couple of millennia), there is clearly less and less that individuals cognitively share in common.

The modern rejection of tradition is also reinforced by our strong commitment to individuality in general and originality in

<i>Cognitive Individualism</i>	<i>Cognitive Sociology</i>	<i>Cognitive Universalism</i>
Thinking as individuals	Thinking as members of thought communities	Thinking as human beings
Subjectivity Personal experience	Intersubjectivity Conventional cognitive traditions	Objectivity Natural or logical inevitability
Personal cognitive idiosyncrasies	Cultural, historical, and subcultural cognitive differences	Universal cognitive commonalities

Figure 1.1. The scope and agenda of cognitive sociology

particular. In sharp contrast to more traditional (religious, military, juridical) systems of education, where individuals are basically taught and expected to cognitively reproduce what their predecessors have already thought before them (and which are therefore rarely concerned with plagiarism, for example), modern education promotes a pronouncedly skepticist (and thereby inevitably irreverent) spirit of free inquiry.⁵⁵ If there was ever a period in human history when individuality and originality were celebrated to such an extent, it is now. People who only five centuries ago would have been burned alive because they refused to think like everyone else around them actually win Nobel laurels today precisely *because* of their unabashed display of unbridled originality.

This book is an invitation to examine the social foundations of our thinking. It is organized around a discussion of six major cognitive acts—perceiving, attending, classifying, assigning meaning, remembering, and reckoning the time—with each of the following six chapters specifically devoted to one of them. Each of these acts, of course, is performed by specific individuals with certain personal cognitive idiosyncrasies. Each of them, at the same time, is also performed by human beings with certain universal cognitive commonalities. Yet each of these six cognitive acts is also performed by social beings who belong to specific thought communities. It is this latter, social dimension of our thinking that I try to capture.

As evident from Figure 1.1, I highlight the distinctive thrust of cognitive sociology by committing myself throughout the book to a supra-personal yet nevertheless sub-universal level of analysis. In other words, in order to integrate the individualistic and universalistic traditions of approaching cognition, we must focus precisely on what they have thus far left almost untouched between them.

Throughout the book, I therefore specifically stay away from cognitive individualism by calling attention to the strikingly similar manner in which different individuals reckon the time or assign meanings to objects as well as to their common memories and

rather similar cognitive maps of the world. In other words, I deliberately ignore the strictly personal world of individuals and their cognitive idiosyncrasies and focus exclusively on the impersonal mindscapes they share. At the same time, however, I also stay away from cognitive universalism by calling attention to their cognitive differences as members of different thought communities. I thus focus on different culturally specific patterns of performing a given cognitive act, major historical changes in the way it has been performed within a given culture, as well as different subculturally specific patterns of performing it within a given society. To further underscore the conventional nature of the way in which we focus our attention, frame our experience, or remember things, I likewise examine the *politics of cognition*, calling attention to major disputes surrounding the performance of those acts within a given society. In an effort to highlight the normative dimension of our thinking, I also identify various social rules (of interpreting, focusing, categorizing, associating, and remembering) that constrain our cognition.

The six cognitive acts I examine in this book, of course, do not exhaust the phenomenon we call "thinking."⁵⁶ Exploring their social foundations, however, ought to give us at least a general idea of what cognitive sociology has to offer the modern science of the mind.

2 /

Social Optics

A good way to begin exploring the mind would be to examine the actual process by which the world "enters" it in the first place. The first step toward establishing a comprehensive sociology of the mind, therefore, would be to develop a *sociology of perception*.¹

The way we perceive things is often influenced by the way they are perceived by others around us.² Furthermore, we often perceive them in a social manner even when there is no one else around us. Colors, for example, are recognized much more easily when we have distinct names for them and, since languages vary in the way they cut up the color spectrum, people from different cultures often vary in their color perception.³ Along similar lines, there are considerable differences between cultures and across different levels of education within the same culture in depth perception, in perceptual organization, and in individuals' susceptibility to optical illusions.⁴

Yet perception is more than what experimental psychologists study in their laboratories, since it involves more than just a sensory experience of the world. The meaning of "sensing," "smelling," or "hearing," for example, clearly transcends its literal connotation. Our "outlook" and "taste" likewise transcend our strictly sensory experience of our physical surroundings.

It is particularly important, in this regard, to address the interpretive dimension of perception, since what we experience through our