

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31168-7 - Cultural Models in Language and Thought

Edited by Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn

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The papers in this volume, a multidisciplinary collaboration of anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists, explore the way in which cultural knowledge is organized and used in everyday language and understanding. Employing a variety of methods, which rely heavily on linguistic data, the authors offer analyses of domains of knowledge ranging across the physical, social, and psychological worlds, and reveal the crucial importance of tacit, presupposed knowledge in the conduct of everyday life.

Many of the papers included examine American cultural knowledge; others, by anthropologists, provide accounts from very different cultures. Collectively, the authors argue that cultural knowledge is organized in “cultural models” – story-like chains of prototypical events that unfold in simplified worlds – and they explore the nature and role of these models. They demonstrate that cultural knowledge may take either proposition-schematic or image-schematic form, each enabling the performance of different kinds of cognitive tasks. Metaphor and metonymy are shown to have special roles in the construction of cultural models: the former allowing for knowledge to be mapped from known domains of the physical world onto conceptualizations in the social and psychological domains as well as in unknown physical-world domains; the latter providing different types of prototypical events out of which cultural models are constructed. The authors also reveal that some widely applicable cultural models recur nested within other, more special-purpose models, thereby lending cultures their thematicity. Finally, they show that shared models play a critical role in thinking, one that has gone largely unappreciated in recent cognitive science – that is, that of allowing humans to master, remember, and use the vast amount of knowledge required in everyday life.

This innovative collection will appeal widely to anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, philosophers, students of artificial intelligence, and other readers interested in the processes of everyday human understanding.

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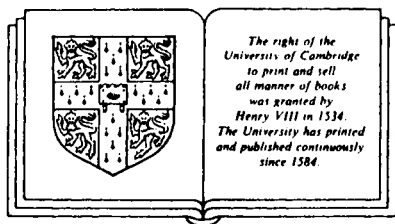
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Preface

This volume represents an interdisciplinary effort that has brought together anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists who study human cognition. In recent years, cognitive scientists from these three fields and others have converged in the study of knowledge, its organization, and its role in language understanding and the performance of other cognitive tasks.

Here, we present a cultural view. We argue that cultural knowledge – shared presuppositions about the world – plays an enormous role in human understanding, a role that must be recognized and incorporated into any successful theory of the organization of human knowledge. As we summarize in the introductory chapter, cultural knowledge appears to be organized in sequences of prototypical events – schemas that we call *cultural models* and that are themselves hierarchically related to other cultural knowledge. This volume, then, is an interdisciplinary investigation of cultural models and the part they play in human language and thought.

Earlier versions of most of the chapters in this volume were assembled and presented at a conference held in May 1983 at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. However, to think of the book as a conference volume would be to fail to appreciate its history, which goes back some time before the Princeton conference. As histories should, this one has a lesson. It tells how, under felicitous circumstances, institutional support can enable scientific collaboration even across disciplinary boundaries.

The developments described in this volume were underway in the late 1970s. One of us, Naomi Quinn, then a member of the Social Science Research Council Committee on Cognitive Research, organized an interdisciplinary workshop under the auspices of that committee to draw together some of the new ideas about culture and cognition. Held in August 1979 in La Jolla, California, under the rubric “The Representation of Cultural Knowledge,” that workshop numbered among its participants four of the contributors to the present volume – Roy D’Andrade, Edwin Hutchins, Dorothy Holland, and Naomi Quinn. As a substantive statement about the role of cultural knowledge in the understanding process, the workshop could be fairly characterized as premature. Many of the talks and much of the discussion had a tentative quality. Several of the formal

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discussants, deliberately recruited from fields of cognitive science outside of anthropology, made clear their skepticism about that discipline's contribution to cognitive studies. The perspective represented in this volume was incipient at La Jolla, but undeveloped. Yet the workshop was a necessary first step toward defining a common enterprise and setting a theoretical agenda.

Naomi Quinn's involvement in the activities of the SSRC committee enabled her to identify other people outside of her own field who were working toward similar ideas about cultural knowledge. She became better acquainted with the thinking of committee members Eleanor Rosch, a psychologist, and Charles Fillmore, a linguist, whose ideas and observations were to figure importantly in the approach developed in this book. At La Jolla, she met for the first time psychologists Allan Collins and Dedre Gentner and heard a paper on folk models they were presenting at an overlapping conference. At another committee activity that summer in Boulder, Colorado, she met linguist George Lakoff (though not for the first time, he reminded her) and obtained from him a copy of the book in manuscript, *Metaphors We Live By*, which he and Mark Johnson had just completed. Lakoff later invited Quinn to be an observer at his Conference on Cognitive Science, Language, and Imagery funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and held in Berkeley in the spring of 1981; there, she met Charlotte Linde and other linguists with similar interests.

At neighboring universities, the two of us talked on about our common view of "folk knowledge," which was still crystallizing out of work in cognitive anthropology and related fields of cognitive science. We decided to organize a multidisciplinary symposium for the 80th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C., in December 1981. We called it "Folk Theories in Everyday Cognition." The resulting group of participants, and the papers they presented, encouraged our vision.

Contributions by Lutz, Price, Sweetser, and White in this volume began as meeting papers delivered at that symposium; Holland, Hutchins, and Lakoff also participated, giving different papers than those they ultimately presented at the Folk Models conference that culminated in this book. The earlier La Jolla workshop had served as a beginning; the AAA symposium has a somewhat different but equally important role as a dry run for the conference to follow.

Among members of the American Anthropological Association, it is popular to question the intellectual defensibility of meetings sessions, with the limited time constraints they place on paper and discussion length and the peripatetic audiences they attract. These critics overlook the important role of sessions like the one we organized as preliminaries to more ambitious professional activities. Relatively untaxing of organizational and fund-raising effort, the AAA symposium was an opportunity to gauge whether the new ideas about "cultural knowledge," "folk theories," and

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“folk models” (which eventually became “cultural models”) were sufficiently developed to merit a larger conference. It was also an occasion to experiment with the composition of the group, so that in the end we might identify and include individuals, whatever their disciplines, whose perspectives and enthusiasms matched our own in substantial ways. Finally, it served to orient individual efforts toward production of conference papers. It was shortly after the well-attended AAA symposium, with its high-quality papers, that we decided the time was ripe to seek funding for a full-scale conference.

By then, unable to raise new operating funds, and having already sponsored a series of valuable conferences and workshops, the SSRC Committee on Cognitive Research was soon to be disbanded. The conference proposal we submitted to the Anthropology Program of the National Science Foundation was adapted from one Quinn had earlier drafted as a section of the final, unsuccessful umbrella proposal intended to fund the continuing activities of the SSRC Committee. NSF funded our proposal. Concerned that the grant might not cover all the expenses for this large conference, we applied to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for supplementary support. Working in consultation with NSF, Wenner-Gren contributed funds to fly our most distant participant, Roger Keesing, from Australia.

Quinn was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study during the academic year 1982–83, as part of a group of researchers in cognition. Learning that the Institute sometimes hosted conferences, she explored the possibility of holding the conference there. The advantages, in terms of facilities, supporting staff, and location, quickly became evident. We formally proposed to Institute Director Harry Woolf and to Clifford Geertz, the anthropologist on the faculty of the School of Social Science, that they host the conference, and they graciously agreed. Subsequently, the project was granted an additional small amount by the Institute out of Exxon Educational Fund monies at its disposal; these funds allowed us to invite interested “observers” from the Institute and from surrounding universities to conference meals, to interact further with conference participants.

It was clear to us by its close that a promising framework for the investigation of cultural knowledge was emerging at this conference, and that the research that had been reported in the delivered papers was sufficiently developed and interrelated to warrant publication. Scientists working independently along similar lines had been brought together to exchange ideas and to articulate a common approach. We are hopeful that publication of their chapters, with the integrating volume introduction we have provided, will convince other cognitive scientists of the heretofore largely neglected role of cultural presuppositions in human cognition and also demonstrate to other anthropologists the usefulness and promise of a cognitive approach to culture.

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We have detailed the history of the efforts that led to this publication to make the point that institutional support of scientific projects such as this one has a cumulative effect not easy to assess in the short term. The book is the product of a lengthy, tentative process of regrouping and exchange, a process realized in several formal gatherings organized according to several different professional formats and made possible by the funding and facilities of an array of different institutions operating with different institutional mandates and designs. They were all indispensable. We hope *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* will testify to the value of such repeated institutional support for organized meetings, large and small.

We are indebted to all these supporting organizations, and to all their individual staff members with whom we worked. We came to appreciate keenly the special competencies that some of these individuals have for making the scientific process work. Lonnie Sherrod, staff associate at the Social Science Research Council, shepherded the Committee on Cognitive Research during most of Quinn's tenure on it and did so with an acute sense of what was happening in that quarter of the social sciences and what could be helped along. Stephen Brush, then the staff associate in the Anthropology Program at NSF who was responsible for oversight of our grant, shared much good advice about how to make an intellectually satisfying conference happen. Mary Wisnovsky, assistant to the director, and Grace Rapp, her assistant in the Office of the Director at the Institute for Advanced Study, are two unforgettable people with a special talent for making a conference happen smoothly and painlessly, even making it fun to give one. The postconference editing task has been lightened enormously by the skilled assistance of Carole Cain and Anne Larme, two anthropology graduate students at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. We thank them all.

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