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The Not So Common Sense

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This book challenges two basic assumptions that orient much contemporary social scientific thinking. Offering theory and empirical research, it rejects the classic liberal view that people share a basic “common sense” or rationality. At the same time, it questions the view of contemporary social theory that meaning is simply an intersubjective or cultural product. Through in-depth interviews, it explores the underlying logic of cognition and, rather than discovering a common sense or rationality, finds that people reason in fundamentally different ways and that these differences affect the kind of understandings they craft and the evaluations they make. As a result, people actively reconstruct culturally prevalent meanings and norms in their own subjective terms. The book provides a comprehensive description of three types of socio-political reasoning and the full text of three exemplary interviews. Its findings help explain such puzzling social phenomena as why people do not learn even when it is to their advantage to do so, or why they fail to adapt to changed social conditions even when they have clear information and motivation. The book argues that this kind of failure is commonplace and discusses examples ranging from the crisis of modernity to the classroom performance of university students. Building on the ideas of Jean Piaget, George Herbert Mead, and Jurgen Habermas, it offers a new orienting vision, structural pragmatics, to account for these social phenomena and personal research in cognition. The concluding chapter discusses the implications of this work for the study of social cognition, political behavior, and democratic theory.