

Three

Because of our general unwillingness to abandon well-established routines, studies explicitly addressed to the investigation of change have been prone to contain descriptions of a social system at two points in time—or even at *one* point in time!—and then to rely on *extrapolation* between these two states, or from the one state, to indicate the course of change. I feel that if we want to understand social change, we need concepts that allow us to observe and describe the *events* of change. Our contribution as social anthropologists must lie in providing such primary materials for understanding the processes; it lies in our powers of observation out there where change is happening today, and not in producing secondary data by deduction and extrapolation. If this means that we must recast our very description of social systems in order to accommodate these data about the events of change, that makes our task more difficult but also more interesting.

The reason for the social anthropologist's impasse when he tries to add change to his traditional description of social systems is found in the basic characteristics of the descriptive concepts we habitually use. We wish to characterize groups, societies, or cultures, and to do this we have to aggregate individual observations. We generally think of the procedure as one where we aggregate individual cases of behavior to *patterns* of behavior!