

## Foreword

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“Why didn’t I pack my computer,” I ask in dismay. The accumulated e-mail messages now approximate a mountain that I simply cannot face. And, there is also an unfinished manuscript that I have promised to a journal, and several phone messages that demand “immediate” attention. Most significantly, there is tomorrow’s class for which I must prepare. My plight is not uncommon. For most of my scholarly friends, this is normal life. We always seem to be running an up-hill race in which we are perpetually behind. We seldom take the time to look backward, to ask ourselves about the trajectory, how the pieces fit with one another, and the accumulated lessons we have derived from our efforts. And this is regrettable.

It is against this backdrop that I was graced with the arrival of Lois Holzman’s manuscript, *Vygotsky at Work and Play*. Here was an enormously active scholar and practitioner who did take the time to reflect on her activities of the past years. The results should be an invitation to all of us. In this work, Holzman reflects on her many endeavors over recent decades – her work in therapeutic settings, in schools, in after-school programs, in performance programs for adolescents, in organizations, and more. She locates the ways in which these endeavors build upon each other, the implicit and pervasive values they exhibit, and the growth in her own theoretical views over the years. In many respects her concern in this book is with human development, and in its exposition it brilliantly demonstrates just such development in action.

One of the most engaging aspects of this book is the way in which Holzman ties these various endeavors together theoretically, and her illumination of the way her theoretical understanding has developed through her practice. This is a most important aspect of the book, as the place of theory in the social sciences has been significantly eroded over the years. It is erosion to which the positivist/empiricist expansion first contributed. Increasingly, for scholars, the strong emphasis was placed on contributions to the empirical literature. Professional success depended on published research outcomes. Theoretical and metatheoretical discussion became moribund. The post-modern turn was additionally critical of theory, but in this case of traditional claims to theory as truth bearing. Theory was again thrown into question. However, in the present work, Holzman shows us how theory has played a significant role in orienting her activities. She demonstrates the way in which theory entered into the discussions that accompanied the unfolding of the various initiatives. And, most significantly, she lets us see how the activities helped her to expand and enrich the theoretical views with which she began. And now, we as readers are invited to crawl into this theoretical space, and to explore its implications for our own pursuits.

For my own part I find these developments in theory, and their application to practice, enormously exciting. The work is informed at base by the writings of Lev Vygotsky. These writings have long functioned as a radical critique of mainstream cognitive psychology, embracing as it does a view of human cognition as self-contained, and biologically determined. For Vygotsky, human thought is fundamentally dependent on the socio-cultural context. Social action is not, then, driven by cognitive mechanisms beyond human control. Rather, for Vygotsky and a dynamic group of like-minded

scholars, social transformation may be achieved through critical analysis and collaborative activity. While Holzman's demonstration of Vygotsky at work and play is illuminating, what I find especially exciting is the direction in which she takes Vygotsky's work. Many psychologists have tended to fold Vygotskian theory into an individualist frame. That is, they have resonated with passages in Vygotsky that focus on "higher mental functions." On this account, the social world must be taken into account, but primarily as a determining influence on mental life. In itself, the social world is of no special interest. Holzman reverses the emphasis, and with important results. If individual action emerges from a social source, then it is through social processes that transformation may be achieved. And this transformation is the essence of human development.

Thus, for example, Holzman is not content to view the *zone of proximal development* in its more individualist and cognitive terms, that is, as the difference between what the individual may accomplish in terms of existing cognitive functioning and what may be accomplished through the help of another. Rather, Holzman introduces us to the concept of a *zone of emotional development*, in which she emphasizes the development of emotion in collaborating with others in building functional relationships. The strong emphasis, then, is on the collaborative process, with individual development carried in its wake.

As Holzman also demonstrates, the shift in emphasis from cognition to emotion has significant implications for practice. By including the emotions, Holzman is able to make Vygotsky relevant in new and important ways to practices in therapy, education, and daily life. Further, from Holzman's standpoint, this shift to the social implications of

Vygotsky's work puts an entirely new light on the function of play in social life. It is in play that challenges are made to "things as they are," and it is through playing together that development is hastened. At this point, the entire spectrum of the arts becomes relevant to human development, and to practices in schools and organizations.

Improvisation in daily relations becomes a key to continuing development.

In the end, Holzman calls into question the entire, individualist centered tradition. She rightfully sees that the individual cut away from relationships is an empty vessel. And it is in this move that I find Holzman's journey an especially significant stimulus for my own work. I am just completing an effort that has been incubating for over a decade. This work, *Relational Being, Beyond the Individual and Community*, will now bear the traces of relationship with Holzman's inspiring book. I am indeed grateful.

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