

Draft Interview with Lois Holzman to appear in *The Psychologist*, the official monthly publication of the British Psychological Society

One moment that set the course of your career

Every moment of my final undergraduate course, Modern English Grammar. This course introduced linguistics to me, not only the discipline but the word itself. I'd always been fascinated and puzzled about language—If you spoke well and easily, did that mean you were smart? And if not, were you dumb? How was it possible that languages were so different from each other? Where did words come from? How did anyone ever become a speaker, a reader, a writer? My linguistics course validated these teenage musings, and I was overjoyed to discover that there were people who actually spent their lives exploring, investigating and discovering things about language. I entered a PhD program in linguistics. At the same time, I was a research assistant for a psychologist doing psycholinguistics studies of young children. I got hooked on language development, and that eventually led me to getting a PhD in psychology.

One journal article or book that you think all psychologists should read

Philosophical Investigations by Ludwig Wittgenstein. This unique, eccentric and brilliant 20th century philosopher takes apart nearly every concept that underlies contemporary psychology (and puts just a few of them back together). This book and other of his later writings are a valuable tool for psychology to examine its assumptions—the big ones, like causality and essence. Wittgenstein is hard but really fun to read! The study of psychology needs to include a serious examination of its concepts and language. Sadly, such self-reflexivity is missing in most psychology programs.

One thing that you would change about psychology/psychologists

The too common tendency to overstate, predict and hype the public. So much of what psychologists do is worthy and important in “non-glamorous” ways. I think far too many conclusions about what people are and implications for how people should live are being drawn. Now this goes on in all areas of research, but psychology—it seems to me—has more of a moral imperative to stay close to the data, since human beings are the “objects” of its investigations, and human beings make meaning. We're thus impacted in a quite unique way by what's said about us!

One challenge you think psychology faces

Giving up trying to be a hard science. So many counselors, psychotherapists, school psychologists and research psychologists that I speak with and hear about are deeply unhappy—they feel that their chosen profession is at odds with their humanity. Human beings are far more complex, unsystematic and uncategorizable than the dominant psychology instructs us they are. Fortunately, hundreds of alternatives that take a social, cultural, relational approach to psychology are being developed, studied and practiced. The East Side Institute, which I founded with philosopher and therapist Fred Newman, developed one of these alternatives, social therapeutics. Unfortunately, far too few university and professional programs include alternatives to mainstream approaches. Our Institute is an exception.

One cultural recommendation (i.e. book, film, music)

I have two—

- 1) *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll (in which I first discovered the magical creativity and playfulness of language)
- 2) The “United States of Tara” (TV series in which Tara’s family struggles—and plays—with her multiple personalities)

One alternative career path you may have chosen

Dog trainer.

One hero from psychology past or present

Lev Vygotsky, the brilliant and loving revolutionary scientist who discovered the zone of proximal development and much, much more. Working during the early years of the Soviet Union, Vygotsky believed that creating a new society was a cultural and human development task. From 1924 until his death from tuberculosis only ten years later at age 38, he devoted his life to creating a social-cultural-historical psychology that understands and relates to human beings not as who we “are” but as who we “are” and simultaneously who we “are becoming.” Many around the world are building upon his discoveries about learning and development, language and thought, and play. I’m proud to be one of them.

One great thing that psychology has achieved

Humanizing craziness.

One problem [research, professional or otherwise] that psychology should deal with

Its insistence that “the social” is always secondary to, and derivative from, the individual.

One hope for the future of psychology

That psychology would recognize the significance of play and performance and turn its focus to the becoming-ness of human beings.

One proud moment

One month after September 11, 2001, convening the first Performing the World conference, where several hundred people from dozens of countries came together to share the power of performance, play and creativity and begin to create community. In October 2014, I’ll be chairing the eighth Performing the World conference, with the theme, “How Shall We Become?”

One psychological superpower I’d like to have

The ability to de-alienate the world’s population in a single moment.

One final thought

If you’re troubled by the institutional and conceptual constraints of psychology, don’t be discouraged—transform it!