How Psychology Needs to Change

Lois Holzman, Talk given at Vygotsky Today Symposium, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina, November 2004.
 I am a psychologist and I am proud of that. I find it a privilege to devote my life to helping people. The American Psychological Association, which is the main professional association of psychologists in the United States with over one hundred thousand members, says that its mission is to promote the general welfare. I take this very seriously as a member of that organization and I work to promote the general welfare. But while I am a member of the American Psychological Association and I am proud to be a psychologist, I very strongly believe that the conceptual path that psychology is on is very misguided and that, unless dramatic changes are made in psychology, it will not contribute to promoting the general welfare or to making the world a better place. I've come to have this belief that psychology needs to change—and ideas on how to change it—from the practice that my colleagues and I in the United States have developed and from my travels around the world to research and learn from others who are creating innovative projects. In these remarks I will offer a new conceptual framework for psychology for your consideration.

The work that I do cannot be understood separate from its institutional location—a community that has been (and continues to be) a unique social experiment that has been going on for roughly 30 years. The heart of the experiment/community is social therapy, a practice that helps children, young people, and adults to grow emotionally as a way to deal with the problems and pain of life. As a positive psychology practice it is not one that labels or diagnoses or gets into people's identities at all. Social therapy is a psychology that we could characterize more correctly as one of activism and creativity.
 The beginnings of our unique experiment go back 35 years ago or so when Fred Newman, who was a philosopher of science by training, left City College in New York City with a small, disheveled group of 60s radical students. Finding the environment of the academy stifling, they went out to try to build something, to create something. This small group of about thirty people went into middle class communities, working class communities, and very poor communities and set up health clinics, therapy centers, free schools—and they had absolutely no plan. They said, "We want to do something to make the world a better place and we're going to go out and do something even though we don't have any idea of how to do it." They had one rule, if you will, even though they didn't call it a rule, it was one major conviction, which was: "We will only keep this—whatever this is—open if people come. We will not take any

government or corporation or foundation funds. We don't want our hands tied. We don't want to be controlled by somebody's whim of what they are going to give money for this year or next year."

It's now 2004, some 30-35 years later, and this is what has been accomplished: we have a community—we call it a development community because human development is the focus of the dozens of projects that we have created and that are sustained and successful. The East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy is the community's research and training centre. We have trained hundreds of people in social therapy. Some work in our ten centers in cities in the U.S. Some work in hospitals, mental health clinics, schools, and community centers. The Institute also offers a yearly series of continuing education seminars and workshops, and hosts national and international conferences that bring together people across disciplines. Fred Newman and I write books and articles, and the research we do is in the partnership with people in projects rather than studying them from a far.
 Other projects of the community are three wonderful youth programs. One is called the All Stars Talent Show Network. The idea behind this is that young people, in particular the poor children in inner-city neighborhoods, have very little to do after school and they have very, very few places to give expression to how creative they are. Certainly, they rarely can do that in school. We wanted to do something that would be an alternative to violence, to drugs, to crimes, to gangs, and to put it simply, we wanted to figure out if we could help young people to develop. So, we looked around, at their lives and saw that one of the few places where they can be creative and one of the things they love to do is to get on stage, and sing and dance and rap... and, so we came up with this idea that we could take their love of performance and see if we could help them transform it into a tool for their own growth. We gave them a challenge, which was, "You're a great performer on the stage, now here are two new performances for you: perform every day wherever you are, and perform the creating of your own organization!" They rose to the challenge and, at this moment, 20 years into it, there are about 10.000 young people in New York City who participate and the program has now started in about six other cities.

We have two other youth programs and I could talk for hours about these programs, but I won't, I will just give you one sentence on each one right now. One is Youth OnStage!, a youth theatre and theatre school, and the other is the Development School for Youth, a 12-week leadership training program for high school students to introduce them to the world of work. In these programs their partners are Wall Street executives, directors of hospitals, well known dancers,

all kinds of adults who are successful in their profession. Finally, there is Performance of a Lifetime, our consultancy firm that goes into the corporate world and into non-profit organizations, and brings our approach to the problems of leadership, management, organizational development and diversity.

 These programs share a social vision and a methodology. Part of that methodology is the challenging of assumptions. As a teacher I have always thought that challenging assumptions was essential to any real learning no matter what the subject was. And, even more important, I believe that the challenging of assumptions is necessary to living. So, I want to explore some assumptions of the subject matter of psychology and show some philosophical biases that shape how it is that we see and relate to human beings.

What is generally accepted as psychology? While I will not quote from an introductory to psychology text book, I feel confident that the accepted the definition of psychology is that it is the study of human beings—who we are, how we are, how we got to be that way, how we adapt to society (whatever that society happens to be, whichever one we're in), how we don't adapt, and what to do about the people who don't adopt. So, it's a psychology of something that is. Now I think, along with many others, that there is a big problem here. Something is missing—something big—because we as individuals, and we as this or that group we are part of, and we as the world as a very, very big group (the world population), we are not just who we are. And we, as these individuals and as the world community, are not just objects that adapt to the conditions that exist. What's missing is that psychology doesn't have really anything to say about the human capacity to reshape and change what exists, or, to put it in other way, to make history. So, my recommendation is that we move beyond a psychology of what is and include the study and practice of human transformation, the study and practice of becoming, and the study and practice of the relationship between being and becoming. I am convinced that we won't be able to do anything about most of the world's problems unless we really get seriously working on this!

Part of the process of moving beyond the current psychology needs to be the exploration of its assumptions. Take the concept social development. What picture does that phrase create? What do these words refer to? What are the assumptions in that phrase? First, that there is development that is not social and second, that the unit that develops is the individual. Often "social" is added to distinguish what you are talking about from (what is presumed to be) some other kind of development, as if there exists social development, but also

cognitive development, perceptual development, physiological development, organizational development, etc. Presumably these are not social. Other times, social is used as a characteristic of individuals, as in "cognition is socially situated", or the phrase "socially competent" or the belief that infants are social from birth. In all these cases, ("social development" versus "cognitive development" or "social from birth") what happens is that the nonsocial is privileged, which is why you have to add the word "social," and the individual is primary.

Now, let's look at the word "development" in the phrase "social development." In general, development is understood as an internal process that individual goes through. Most psychologists today accept at least a weak interactionist position; they no longer think that it's a natural unfolding that's universal. Indeed, most psychologists would say that they believe that development occurs in a social world, but rarely do they explore the assumptions and implications of the phrase. For all it does is privilege individual as nonsocial, for why else would you need to say, "in a social world?" What I understand by "development occurs in a social world" is that the unit that develops is the individual separated from—that is, in the social world.

A pause to get away from psychology for a minute. If we think about advances in science and technology over the last fifty years, it is astonishing how much of how we live has been transformed by the development of new tools. Gutenberg, Newton, Einstein—their amazing discoveries have themselves been transformed, creating new technological tools and new conceptions of the natural and physical world they could hardly have imagined. But there have been remarkably few conceptual tools created to transform human relations. In terms of psychological concepts, if we take those of Freud, Piaget and Skinner as examples, it is clear that their discoveries have not seen an analogous transformation. We still function conceptually with the unit of learning and development being the Freudian/Piagetian/Skinnerian individual. There is a danger when technology leads.

The conceptual transformation psychology needs, in my view, is to develop into the study of the social activity of becoming. Right away the unit of study become process. Right away, it becomes a social unit. The question to be researched is how do human beings produce becoming, and what helps and what hinders this process? Vygotsky helps us here. For he showed us that you could not use old tools, especially old conceptual tools, to do new things, or even an old model (conception) of what a tool is. He gave us the new conceptual tool of tool as tool-and-result. With tool-and-result we create the tool and in the process of creating it, we get "the result." This is the method to

create a psychology of becoming.

It is, as well, the way in which human beings develop. Vygotsky showed this with very young children. He showed that development is created by social units, that learning and development in early childhood are social-cultural joint activities of being who we are and who we are becoming. Young children learn and grow because they are supported to "perform a head taller than they are." It follows then, that in order to study learning and development, we must study and promote joint (ensemble) activity, rather than individuated behavior.

In the work that my colleagues and I do in all those projects that I mentioned earlier, we have been able to specify two critically important aspects of the process of joint (ensemble) activity. Both can be expressed as directives: "Grow the group!" and "Perform!" For these are the joint activities that create ongoing human development.

If learning and development occur by creating environments for joint activity, in which you can perform past where you are at the moment, then it would make sense that what you would want to do to continue learning and growing is to create joint activity. We talk of growing the group, or building the group, because the current psychology (as social science and as how people experience themselves) is individualistic. In contrast, we want people to experience the socialness of existence, and we want people to experience what it means to exercise the power of collective creativity—and by that I don't mean anything very grandiose. I mean events as every day as the baby saying, "Ba-ba" and the mother saying, "Do you want your bottle?' That is joint activity; that is collective creation. However, most of us walk around most of the time not experiencing that we create together in that way. Social therapy, the approach we practice, has as its task helping the people who come to therapy to create an environment (their group) in which they can get help. In that process of "growing the group" people come to create new emotional activity, and if you create a new emotional activity, the location of your depression, or your panic, or your anger is new, it is relocated.

And why "Perform!"? Performing intensifies and changes the relationship between being and becoming. To put this in more cultural, political terms, as human beings we live our lives in groups—family, work groups, school groups, play groups, all kinds of groups, cities, countries, continents. But we don't do it very well. It seems clear from everyday life and from the world situation that our group skills are not very developed. I think we don't understand what groups are. If we go back to the phrase "social development" I think that we tend to think that groups are just collections of individuals. What I am suggesting, saying or claiming is that we need a new conception of what

development is, what social is and what a group is. The unit that grows, that develops, that learns, is a social unit not an individual unit. Groups grow. So, for me social development is the joint activity of creating groups in order to learn, to grow, to give help, to get help, to create culture.

If we can think in this way and learn about the many, many projects and individual psychologists in different parts of the world that are embracing this idea and developing new programs and projects and concepts with it, and if we see the social unit of development as a very rich area for new research and new practice, then we might together create some very new kinds of responses to some critically important issues of the day. For starters, here are just a few:

• How to give expression to our caring for others, for nature, for the environment • How to hurt "the other" and ourselves less—and how to deal with the pain and hurt that we do inflict in a more growthful way • How to solve problems and deal with conflict • How to maintain the joy and commitment to learning that very young children have • How to become changers and creators of life and stop being objects to be manipulated

I believe that psychology up to this point has not done a very good job in addressing these issues, and I believe that a new psychology—of being and becoming and of the social unit can address them.

Thank you for your patience with this brief introduction to a new conceptual path for psychology, a path that, I believe, can help psychology contribute to social development ("the general welfare"). Some are on the path already, but many, many more are needed to co-create it. Please join us!