Figured Worlds and Education: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Identity and Self are concepts that are not only constituted by the labels—"smart girl", "delinquent", "incompetent", or "beloved teacher"—that people place on themselves and others, especially in schools. Identity is also very much about how people come to understand themselves, how they come to "figure" who they are, through the "worlds" that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds. The articles included in this special issue of The Urban Review focus on different social contexts of education and how the worlds formed in these contexts helped shape how people came to make sense of themselves in these worlds and in society. Before exploring the different figured worlds in education researched by the contributors, I will provide an overview of this theoretical framework.

FIGURED WORLDS

The concept of figured worlds was first introduced by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) in their seminal book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Figured worlds, however, is not an isolated concept, but is part of Holland et al.'s (1998) larger theory of self and identity. Figured worlds are intimately tied to identity work.

In order to develop their theory, Holland et al. drew from different (sometimes opposing) schools of thought, including culturalists, constructivists, and universalists, and from the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin. Holland et al. suggest that cultural production and heuristic development are important processes for identity analyses because they move us away

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(but not completely) from cultural determinism and situational totalitarianism to make (some) way for the importance of improvisation and innovation (agency). In this sociocultural practice theory of identity and self, attention is focused on identities forming in process or activity.

Figured worlds is one of the four contexts that Holland et al. suggest are sites where identities are produced. People "figure" who they are through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationships with the people who perform these worlds. People develop new identities in figured worlds.

Holland et al. broadly define figured worlds as "socially produced, culturally constituted activities" (pp. 40–41) where people come to conceptually (cognitively) and materially/procedurally produce (perform) new self-understandings (identities). According to Holland et al. figured worlds have four characteristics:

(1) Figured worlds are cultural phenomenon to which people are recruited, or into which people enter, and that develop through the work of their participants.
(2) Figured worlds function as contexts of meaning within which social encounters have significance and people's positions matter. Activities relevant to these worlds take meaning from them and are situated in particular times and places.
(3) Figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced, which means that in them people are sorted and learn to relate to each other in different ways.
(4) Figured worlds distribute people by relating them to landscapes of action; thus activities related to the worlds are populated by familiar social types and host to individual senses of self.

Figured worlds are therefore processes or traditions of apprehension that give people shape and form as their lives intersect with them. In figured worlds people learn to recognize each other as a particular sort of actor, sometimes with strong emotional attachments, value certain outcomes over others, and recognize and attach significance to some acts and not others. Whether people are drawn into or recruited into them, or by some other means enter particular figured worlds, depends on who they are and their personal social history (history-in-person).

Holland et al. state that we may never enter some figured worlds based on social rank or position (or the lack thereof), while others we may ourselves deny to outsiders. Some figured worlds we may learn fully and others we may miss by contingency. And, I would add, we may yet enter other

figured worlds only temporarily, peripherally, while in others we may come to assume positions of relative power and prestige.

Because figured worlds are socially organized and performed, they are dependent on interaction and people's intersubjectivity for perpetuation. In them, people ''figure'' how to relate to one another over time and across different time/place/space contexts. Holland et al. state that these ways of interacting become almost like ''roles'' (p. 41), but not in the static sense of the older concept. The significance of figured worlds is that they are recreated by work, often contentious work, with others; thus, the importance of activity, not just in a restricted number of figured worlds, but across landscapes of action.

CULTURE, POSSIBILITY, POWER

Although, Holland et al. state that figured worlds can be called ''as if'' realms, most are more substantial than fantasy. Holland et al.'s sociocultural practice theory of self and identity focus attention on figured worlds as sites of possibility (in terms of agency), but also state that figured worlds are a social reality that lives within dispositions mediated by relations of power. Because figured worlds are peopled by characters from collective imaginings (e.g., of class, race, gender, nationality), people's identity and agency is formed dialectically and dialogically in them. Holland et al.'s concept of figured worlds is therefore a useful concept to study identity and agency in education. It is not set on previous static notions of culture; it focuses on activity and emphasizes the importance of power.

Figured worlds are historical phenomenon and each figured world is in turn organized by ''cultural means'' (p. 53), or narratives, storylines and other cultural genre that help organize the figured world. These narratives provide a significant backdrop for interpretation and provide cultural resources that are durable and socially reproduced. These cultural means, Holland et al. claim, are one of the culturalist influences in their work.

Although narratives may be used by participants as though they were pre/scriptive, they are commonly horizons of meaning against which incidents, acts and individuals are interpreted. From social constructivism and practice theory, Holland et al. add that figured worlds happen as social processes and in historical time. Figured worlds are encountered in day-to-day social activity and lived through practices and activities. Identities are thus formed in the processes of participating in activities organized by figured worlds.

From Marxian theory via Leontiev's activity theory and Foucault's analyses of power, Holland et al. and Holland and Lave (2001) recognize that activities within figured worlds are intermeshed with trans-local systems

of power and privilege. Relationships, practices, acts, courses of action, people, and cultural resources within figured worlds are tied to the powerful, trans-local institutions. Different elements within the figured world take on variations of rank and status according to widespread relationships of hierarchy, and even figured worlds themselves are organized around positions of status and influence.

ARTIFACTS AND MATERIALITY

Holland et al. highlight the importance of artifacts as the mediators of human identities and action. As "psychological tools" (p. 60), artifacts provide the means to "evoke" figured worlds. Artifacts gain force in connection to figured worlds and assume both conceptual and material aspects as practical instruments for daily use and as artifacts of collective memory; thus, citing from Cole, Holland et al. state that artifacts bring "developmental histories" (p. 62) of past activities to the present. In figured worlds people learn to ascribe meaning to artifacts such as objects, events, discourses, and to people as understood in relation to particular figured worlds. Holland et al. also state that artifacts help mediate the thoughts and feelings of individual participants and through this means, people acquire the ability to position themselves for themselves. Holland et al. do not stop at description when it comes to artifacts, but, drawing again from Marxian theory, this time via Vygotsky, argue that artifacts can also offer possibilities for becoming, possibilities to expand the possibilities (so to speak).

CONCEPTUAL AND MATERIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

Holland et al. focus specific attention on two processes of self-making (identity): conceptual and material. Conceptually, figured worlds provide the contexts of meanings for concepts of domains of action, for artifacts, and for action (behavior) and for people's understandings of themselves. In figured worlds people learn new perspectives of the world and through them learn to ascribe artifacts and actions with new meaning, new passion or emotion. Figured worlds also provide people with capabilities to influence their own behavior in these worlds. As people's subjectivity(ies) becomes better organized around certain issues important to the figured world, their behavior manifests the ascription of new meaning and the favoring certain activities and practices over others. Materially, people enact every day performances of these senses of self and these performances in turn constantiate relative positions of influence and prestige in and across figured worlds.

IDENTITIES

The importance and influence of figured worlds are also the foundation for Holland et al.'s other three contexts for the production of personal and social identities: negotiations of positionality, space of authoring, and world making. Positionality refers to the positions "offered" to people in different figured worlds (whether that be of a "loud student" or "bad student" or "successful student" or "smart student"). Holland et al. state that positionality is an analytically separable counterpart to figuration because when positioned, people are not so much engaged in self-making, but rather are limited to varying degrees of accepting, rejecting, or negotiating the identities being offered to them. Similarly, in figured worlds people encounter narratives borne out of historical significance (both oppressive and liberating) as well as a distribution of power, rank, and prestige (or the lack thereof) that they either accept, reject, or negotiate to varying degrees.

"Space of authoring", Holland et al. credit to the influence of Bakhtin and his concept of dialogism, or the ability of people to self/sense-make through multiple internal dialogues. Because when they are being socially identified by others people are offered positions that they must accept, reject or negotiate, people (in practice—as we all are) must make choices and respond (according to Derrida (1996) a non-response is also a type of response). Holland et al. state, following Bakhtin, that the world must be answered. Authorship is not a choice; however, the form of the answer is not predetermined.

The third context for the production of identities is in world making. From Vygotsky's studies of play and analyses of the historical emergence of several figured worlds, Holland et al. conclude that through "serious play" new figured worlds may come about (p. 272). Social play, or the "arts and rituals created on the margins in newly imagined communities" can help people develop new competencies to participate in or further develop these new, sometimes marginal figured worlds. In these new (novel) figured worlds lies the possibility for making/creating new ways, artifacts, discourses, acts, perhaps even more liberatory worlds. When fully concretized, Holland et al. state that world making brings us back to the first context—figured worlds.

FIGURED WORLDS AND EDUCATION: THE SPECIAL ISSUE

One of the main critiques of the theoretical concept of figured worlds that I have personally heard charged by some educational researchers is that the framework has not been operationalized for empirical research. Operational meaning that figured worlds is not defined in a concise and concrete way and thus is applied inconsistently by different researchers. Viewed from a more

positivist framework, perhaps this might be an issue, however, the strength of this framework for those of us doing social/cultural analyses lies in the very fact that it cannot be reduced to one simple, content-specific definition. Like the complexity of social/cultural life itself and the people who participate in it and how they make sense of themselves and their participation, there is no one outcome for measuring social/cultural activity. It is also important to mention that figured worlds, as outlined above is part of Holland et al.'s larger blueprint for understanding and studying identity and agency, and yet few scholars in general have taken on the full task of using the framework more comprehensively.

Some scholars doing research in education, however, have used figured worlds or related concepts in different ways each contributing further to the usefulness of this concept in studying identity, agency, and contexts in education (Bartlett, 2007; Blackburn, 2003; Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Dagnais, Day, & Toohey, 2006; Jurow, 2005; Leander, 2002; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Street, 2003; Wortham, 2004, 2006; Urrieta, 2006). I will not delve deeply into the literature here because Rubin (this issue) does a good job of reviewing that literature in her piece. It is important to mention here, however, that figured worlds, even when detached from the more extensive set of concepts in Holland et al.'s sociocultural theory of identity and self, is useful as a tool for studying identity production in education, particular sociocultural constructs in education, local educational contexts, and can also be used as a practical tool for crafting figured worlds of possibility. These identified areas of study are, of course, not mutually exclusive and they intersect and inform each other consistently and meaningfully; however, I will use them separately to introduce the articles in this special issue.

Figured worlds is a concept used to study identity production in education. Leander (2002) for example studied the case of "Latanya," an urban African American student, and the classroom interactions as embodied space as well as artifacts that led to her being "located" as "ghetto" by her peers. Wortham (2004) similarly studied Tyisha another African American student who over the course of one year was repositioned from being considered a "good student" to becoming a "disruptive outcast". In his work, Tyisha takes on an oppositional identity willingly and uses her new position to raise issues that take classroom discussions off-topic. In this special issue, my work *Identity Production in figured Worlds: How some Mexican Americans become Chicana/o Activist Educators* (Urrieta) contributes to this line of research by focusing on a broader use of figured worlds to describe how 24 Mexican Americans became Chicana/o Activists and later Chicana/o Activist Educators by participating in the figured worlds of Chicana/o activism (mostly) in colleges and universities. In this article (as in my forthcoming book, University of Arizona Press), I describe how the

participants entered into a more complex process of identity production when they underwent conceptual and procedural identity shifts. Important for urban education was their desire to become educators with the goal of raising consciousness (teaching for social justice) *pero con ganas*.

A second important line of research drawn from the concept of figured worlds is that of exploring larger sociocultural constructs in education. Luttrell and Parker (2001) for example used the concept of figured worlds to study high school students' literacy practices against the larger constructs of school, work and family. Their findings on youth's literacy practices serve as a springboard to question the veracity and legitimacy of the often taken-for-granted notions of what literacy means and what it entails in the various worlds of school, family, and work. Bartlett (2007) also uses the concept, especially the use of artifacts, with emerging literate adults in Brazil to show how various artifacts made her participants, as interpreted against the figured world of the educated person, seem and feel literate. Bartlett's work is important because she shows how people can and do use cultural artifacts to refuse and contest social positioning; thus, raising questions that challenge the larger prevailing notions of what literacy and literacy practices mean in different social contexts. Hatt's contribution to this special issue *Street Smarts versus Book Smarts: The figured world of smartness in the lives of marginalized, urban youth* similarly explores youth's conceptions of ''smartness'' in an alternative education program. Hatt's research reveals that urban youth understand how smartness is constructed in schooling environments, but also understand that being smart is not just about having ''papers'' (diplomas) and other cultural artifacts, but also about being able to survive in urban neighborhoods. Hatt's reflexivity in her piece is noteworthy because she does not erase herself from her research site, but inserts herself as a recognizable actor in this figured world.

A third area of study is focused on particular contexts of education and the identities that emerge (or do not) from those contexts. Boaler and Greeno (2000) provide an important example of how two different classroom settings afford students different perspectives and identities as mathematics learners. In one setting students were presented with a ''narrow and ritualistic'' perspective of math while in the other with a ''broadened'' perspective and these different perspectives made a significant impact in students' identity production as learners of mathematics and their choices about continuing or dropping out of further engagements with math. A more recent example of context focused use of figured worlds is that of Dagenais, Day, and Toohey (2006) who focus on one participant, Sarah, to show how different actors (mostly adults) in her figured world of multilingual students assign meaning to her behaviors and thus ascribe different identity constructions to her. Sarah's reluctance to participate in larger

group discussions with some teachers indicated that she was not a good student, while others valued her participation with peers and summoned the figured worlds of "students learning at their own pace". This study highlights that Sarah managed to keep a desirable identity in the educational contexts only when her performance was situated within a positive interpretation of her behavior. In this issue Rubin's contribution *Learner Identity Amid Figured Worlds: Constructing (in)competence at an urban high school* and Michael, Andrade, and Bartlett's contribution *Figuring "Success" in a Bilingual High School* both contribute to the use of figured worlds for studying educational contexts.

Rubin's work focuses on a high school social studies classroom where the teacher through demeaning and humiliating discourses, unending worksheets, and a poor concept about his students' abilities, offers his students learner identities that made most students uncomfortable. Rubin aptly finds that this is a figured world with "devastating consequences" for the students who learn in them because the learner identities available to them construct incompetence rather than competence for the students. Michael, Andrade, and Bartlett, on the other hand, focus on a bilingual (Spanish/English) high school where the use of the Spanish language, authentic caring relationships between adults and students, and opportunity narratives become important artifacts for constructing success in this figured world. In this figured world emerging bilingual, mostly immigrant students, were offered positions where their language, culture, and personal drive where used as resources to construct a narrative (cultural means) of success rather than failure. Contrary to most mainstream educators' perceptions of immigrant Spanish-speaking high school students, at this particular high school these students were the most successful. In both cases, figured worlds is used as a tool for studying educational contexts and the identities that emerge in those contexts.

The fourth and last use of figured worlds I will focus on is that of making worlds of possibility. Blackburn's (2003) work is important because she highlights the experiences of Kira, a lesbian African American urban youth, at The Loft (a youth run center for LGBTQ students) and her activist work on awareness of LGBTQ issues as worlds of possibility. In these worlds Kira sought out and used (or not) the resources at hand to make room for the perspectives created in marginalized worlds. Jurow (2005) also makes an important contribution by showing how a project-based curriculum (The Antarctica Project) provided the students in her study with a meaningful context for learning mathematics. Jurow asserts that the figured (and imaginary) world proposed by The Antarctica Project, shaped students' approaches to mathematical tasks and helped them to apply mathematical concepts to problem solving. Jurow's research highlights the importance of

play and imagination for creating and crafting learning possibilities. In this issue, Robinson's contribution *The Figured World of History Learning in a Social Studies Methods Classroom* takes us into Dr. Gomez's classroom, a Chicana professor who uses inquiry and revisionist history as a method for teaching critical thinking skills to predominantly white, female pre-service social studies teachers. In his research, Robinson highlights the importance of artifacts in mediating new meaning for the participants and the subsequent shifts in perspectives on history that these pre-service teachers underwent. Importantly, Robinson's contribution implicitly highlights the possibility of crafting figured worlds that enable possibility.

The contributors to this special issue found the concept of figured worlds to be useful in educational research. Using various research methodologies and focusing on different sociocultural contexts of education, each article contributes to further thought on how figured worlds and their proffered identities influence self-formation, and agency broadly. From a practical perspective for urban education, it is important to understand, for example, how immigrant Spanish-speaking urban high school students can be successful in school, or how urban youth understand the world of smartness. Each of these articles, although different, contribute to heuristically understanding identity and self-formation beyond the notion of ascribed labeling or affinity grouping by exposing the complexity of coming to form and re-form the self in various social contexts (time/place/space) in education. Most importantly these articles contribute to a better understanding of self in practice with the agency to improvise, gain access, reassess and re-form beyond a static notion of identity and achievement in studies of education.

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