

Frances Degen-Horowitz

- Born 5/5/1932
- B.A. in Philosophy (1954) Antioch College, M.Ed. in Elementary Education (1954) Goucher College, Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology (1959) The University of Iowa



Major Employment:

- University of Kansas - Chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Life (1968-1978); Vice Chancellor for Research, Graduate Studies and Public Service/Dean of the Graduate School (1978-91)
- Center for Research, Inc. - President (1978-91)
- The Graduate School and University Center of The City University of New York (CUNY) - President (1991-2005)

Major Areas of Work:

- Infant behavior and development, children's learning, theories of child development, intervention and compensatory education

SRCD Affiliation:

- Secretary (1969-73), Governing Council Member (1973-79), President (1997-99)
- Editor, Monographs of the SRCD (1976-82)

SRCD ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW (Update for Original Interview in 1995)

Frances Degen-Horowitz
Center for Jewish Studies
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Interviewed by Peter Vietze
At the Center for Jewish Studies, CUNY Graduate Center
February 18, 2010

Vietze: Okay. This is the oral history project. I'm interviewing Frances Degen-Horowitz, who is the interim director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. And--

Horowitz: President Emerita--

Vietze: --President Emerita of the CUNY Graduate Center. And I am Peter Vietze. I'm Professor and Chairman of the Psychology Department at Montclair State University. And I've known Frances for many, many, many, many, many years and I met her as a professional colleague and I was also her project officer for a while when I was at NICHD and she was at the University of Kansas. And today is February 18th, 2010. We're at the Graduate Center in New York City in Frances' office.

Horowitz: And this is Frances Horowitz. And this is really a Coda or an addendum to an earlier oral history interview that was done by Irv Sigel and I interviewed him at some time in the '90s. And because I've continued to be active in SRCD and also professionally active it was suggested that we make an addition to that oral history record. So I will start sometime in the mid '90s after I had left Kansas and came to the City University of New York Graduate Center as its President. And shortly after

I came in 1991 I was elected President of SRCD. In fact, I had run for President of SRCD in the '80s and not gotten elected. I think Ed Ziegler was the one who was elected. And then I was asked again to run and I said no, because I knew I was transitioning from Kansas to New York and was afraid that it would take--it was not a good time. So subsequently in the mid '90s I was asked again to run and I did agree to run.

So I was voted President of SRCD and I'll pick it up from there, because being President of SRCD gave me a chance not only to do things for SRCD, an organization that I am very fond of and feel very close to, but also each President kind of gets to set an agenda. And I chose as my agenda the commitment to increase SRCD's focus upon attracting minorities to the field of child development. It had long been lamented that the SRCD meetings and membership was overwhelmingly white and our country is changing and we were not seeing coming into the field and affiliating with SRCD the variety of individuals that ought to be in our field. I personally feel very strongly that if we do not succeed in diversifying our membership we will have lost out on a huge pool of talent that's out there that ought to be attracted to the field of child development. And further, that our understanding of child development, particularly in the cultural variations of growing up, require people to be involved who have personal insights and who understand the variables in a more nuanced way than someone coming in who has not grown up in that culture. So I think it's a mutually beneficial opportunity both to bring people of different backgrounds into the field of child development for what they can contribute, but also because I think the field will benefit from the kind of talent that we now often don't have in our field and it's to our own detriment.

So I started what was called the Millennium Scholars Program in SRCD and Larue Allen and I got some funding from the Grant Foundation to--and the idea for this program actually came from Marianne O'Brien's husband, John O'Brien, who just passed away recently, who was a biologist and in some subsection of biology they had done this. They invite, and we now do, juniors and seniors from undergraduate colleges who are a diverse minority, African American, Hispanic, Asian American to come to the SRCD meeting, all expenses paid. They come a day ahead; they have some special meetings. SRCD identifies senior and junior members who will become mentors of these students and they get to go to the convention, to the biennial meeting and have a taste of the excitement, I hope, of what child development research is all about as well as how varied it is. And SRCD, after I completed my presidency a few years later, decided to name the program after me--

Vietze: Oh, how nice.

Horowitz: --about which I have very mixed feelings. But it's a very nice honor and I feel very passionately about this topic, because it's so easy to forget it and to forget what we are missing by not having the diversity of membership that we ought to have in our field, and especially in child development where cultural context is so important in growing up.

Vietze: And do you have a sense about how successful this has been in accomplishing the goal you had?

Horowitz: Well, we don't know. I mean, after I and Larue kind of gave it up and it passed on to individuals who did not keep on top of it as perhaps they should have, and so there has not been the kind of objective evaluation that we needed to have. And in fact, Lonnie Sherrod and I talked just recently, because it may be that they'll take a hiatus and try to do a really good evaluation. It's a complex evaluation, because you're bringing in juniors and seniors whose life decisions are yet to be made, get married, follow a boyfriend or a girlfriend, and often come from smaller institutions that don't have the infrastructure that helps students go on to do graduate study. And one of the roles of the mentors was to try to keep in touch. It's very variable and SRCD doesn't have the staff and infrastructure that might have shepherded this so SRCD is going to do a more systematic evaluation and try to understand whether it has been successful or not. The anecdotal evidence is, of course, wonderful. When I was in SRCD in Denver this past year, I saw the millennium scholars. They came up to me at the end of the meeting and said, "This is the most wonderful experience in my life," and so

on. And we do know that some have gone on and that savvy members of the SRCD look at these talented individuals and think and work to recruit them to their programs, and we know that some of that has gone on.

Vietze: Oh sure. Yes.

Horowitz: But how extensively successful it has been I think we don't know. I'm hoping that SRCD continues this. I said when we started the program that we had to do it for at least 20 years to have any impact, because we only meet every other year. That's just 10 meetings.

Vietze: That's right.

Horowitz: And it takes a long time to--

Vietze: Sure.

Horowitz: --have the confidence of the minority community think this is a real opportunity and to have the schools pursue it. I think one of the things that probably we might have done better in setting this up was to have a stronger relationship with the faculty at the schools from which we attracted the students who might have become our allies in trying to follow as a--or maybe to have invited some of their faculty as well. So I consider that one of my contributions to SRCD and, as I said, this is an organization for which I have a great deal of associative fondness and--

Vietze: Yes.

Horowitz: --I think it's been a very socially responsible organization and it's a very well run organization. And subsequently I participated in the selection of the new executive officer when John Hagen retired. When you become President you serve two years as President Elect, two years as President and then two years as Past President, so it's a six year commitment and--

Vietze: Right.

Horowitz: --you really become very committed to SRCD. I served most recently as Chair of the Finance Committee and I continue on that committee. And I'm always pleased when SRCD asks for my help. I'm glad to give it.

During this time hearkening back to a kind of chance experience in 1985, around 1983, APA had contacted me about co-editing a book on the gifted from a developmental point of view. And the reason--I had done no work on the gifted--but the reason they asked me to do it is because I have a lot of editing experience and the person they had chosen to edit it had not had much editing experience and not done much editing and they wanted a more seasoned editing person. And so I took it on telling them I had no background in gifted development. And then it turned out the person that was supposed to be the co-editor with me did not complete what was to be done and I became the editor of this volume and invited Marianne O'Brien to co-edit it with me. And then, of course, in the process got to know a lot about gifted--the talent--the developing of gifted and talented individuals and they were diverse. And what we did was invite developmental psychologists who didn't work in the area, but to kind of think about and write about giftedness and talent development from their perspectives.

Vietze: Right. It reminds me of some of the earlier books that you edited that I found very valuable, the Child Development--that Child Development volume--

Horowitz: On research, right.

Vietze: --on research that was just--I mean, I--that was one of the best books I had, because it was a wonderful collection and I used it for a very long time.

Horowitz: Yes. Well, one of the things, speaking of long term thing, one of the things you get to do as President of SRCD is give the presidential address, and then it gets published, without being refereed, in the Child Development Journal.

Vietze: Right.

Horowitz: But the editor doesn't always like that idea. But that address, which I entitled Child Development in the PITS: Complex Questions, Simple Answers and Pits means the "person in the street." And I was very gratified recently when someone said to me, "I use that article in all my classes," and I said, "But it's over 10 years old." He said, "It's timeless." And what I did in that talk was really, I think, take to task what I consider our very counterproductive approach to behavioral development, and that is that we tend to get hooked on one theory and then throw out everything that was gathered and understood in the previous theory and speculated what if we had not--

Vietze: Right.

Horowitz: --dismissed Freud, dismissed behaviorism in favor of the next wave or fad, and that we don't have a cumulative science as a result. And there are no general laws that we all agree on--

Vietze: No.

Horowitz: --and biology could not be where it is today if they did not have a set of basic lawful relationships that they understand. And I think we have lost a lot of time and a lot of ground by not having a more systemic approach to our science. But to come back to this gifted thing, that volume was published in 1985 and, to my surprise, it was said to have a seminal effect on the field of gifted development education. And then I kind of lost touch with the thing until Rena Subotnik, who was with APA, came and visited me in about 2003 or so and said, "You know," --she said, "It's 20 years since that volume was published and we want to think of--

Vietze: A revision?

Horowitz: --another one. And I said, "Well, I haven't been involved in the field. I don't know if it's worth publishing something. What has happened?" And so American Psychological Foundation gave me a grant of 20 thousand dollars and we did an invitational conference of developmental psychologists who do not work in the field of gifted and talented as well as people who do research in gifted and talented education. And we had a small invitational conference here and we said to the developmental psychologists, "Take what you're doing, your theory, your approach and think about its relevance to the development of gifted and talented individuals." And one of the things that had happened over this 20 years was the change in vocabulary. Instead of talking about gifted individuals one talks about individuals who have gifts and of giftedness and talent not as an inherent characteristic, but as a developmental manifestation, which may or may not be permanent. And we did it in an age group, infancy, preschool, elementary school and adolescence and it was an enormously productive conference and those papers became the basis of a book on gifted and talented--the developing of giftedness and talent, which is the vocabulary change.

Vietze: Right.

Horowitz: And I learned a great deal. I was invited in 1990 to give the keynote address at the Wallace Conference at the University of Iowa and 20 years later now I'm going to give a keynote address in May--

Vietze: Oh, yes.

Horowitz: --at this conference. So I became involved in this field in which I have still never done any direct research, but--

Vietze: You're a collector--

Horowitz: --well--

Vietze: --an organizer.

Horowitz: --no, what I think I would like to do is apply a theoretical framework to think about this. And the theoretical framework that I developed early on about individual differences and the role of various environmental and biological variables as well as the general environmental context, which I elaborated on in my presidential address and which I've used in this context. And that has been very satisfying.

Vietze: Well, I think it's interesting that that book you started out probably talking about gifted children in the first one and this is a life span perspective, and I think the other interesting thing is that the change in vocabulary has also hit the field of disabilities. We don't talk about disabled people anymore. We talk about people who have disabilities or people with disabilities, people with mental retardation and it's only one of their characteristics. And I think that's a change in our fields to a more civilized way of looking at people--

Horowitz: And a more developmental way--

Vietze: --and more--yes, definitely. You know, I also wanted to mention that your review of *Child Development Research* is also in a way timeless, although it was a particular period. I think that it froze the field at that time, as any review does, and a lot of the people who wrote in that were important at that time and are important in the history. And I think that your other book, *Exploring Developmental Theories*, is also an important book in a similar way as your approach to your view of development, which I think is kind of a unique view. I think it's something that you bring to the field in a way that, I think, one of the things that attracted me to John Watson also was that he had a behavioral view, but he also understood development. And I think there needs to be more of that. I think that too often in the field of developmental psychology we've compartmentalized things and people in one area reject the other one instead of being inclusive. And that was one of the things that I felt you taught me and that I thought was a very important lesson for the field.

Horowitz: Well, we know at one point in--oh, about five years ago, John Wiley published a book, a twelve volume book on child psychology and APA asked me to review it for their contemporary psychology journal which is a book review journal. I said, "I can't read twelve volumes. But what I will do,"--partly because I was so curious--I said, "I'll be glad to read in each volume." And so they sent me these twelve volumes and that's what I did. They're out there. And I read the introduction of each volume and then I skimmed all the chapters in the volume, took notes over the twelve volumes and when I went to write the review I entitled it "Encyclopedic, But Not Yet Systemic."--

Vietze: Oh, good for you.

Horowitz: --because what you see--

Vietze: Oh, boy.

Horowitz: --is this huge, rich variety of information that we have. We know so much, but it is not systematized. You could never get a biological, or physical, or chemical, or physics review that is so all over the place, in which there was no agreement from one sub field to the other, and it's to our great disadvantage.

Vietze: Yes, it's very fractionated.

Horowitz: It's very fractionated and--well, it will never come back. I mean, it will never be unified. At least there ought to be some kind of basic principles that we all agree on and from which we start. I mean, because the cognitive revolution, as it were, was so dismissive of behaviorism it has no appreciation of the simple relationships of reinforcement and learning and so on. Now it's all come back in some way, but in a different vocabulary. So every--

Vietze: Right.

Horowitz: --every time it comes back it's like somebody has reinvented something. You want to say, "You know, go back and read the articles in the '60s, '70s, '80s, it's all there, but it has a different vocabulary."

Vietze: Or even Hull and Spence--

Horowitz: Right.

Vietze: --yes, it's interesting and that's one of the things I try to show my students. I think that's one of the perspectives that you have if you have a long view. It may be the only benefit you have of being around a long time is that you can make these connections and you know about the earlier fields, and I think that's probably an important contribution.

Horowitz: And if you speak to graduate students today and you say, "Clark Hull and Kenneth Spence," they have absolutely no idea--

Vietze: That's right.

Horowitz: --what or who you're talking about.

Vietze: Even young colleagues, even young colleagues! I'm just amazed at how we lose that. I once heard Leon Festinger give a talk and the focus of his talk was we only know ten years worth of any field, the most recent ten years. And I think he's absolutely right.

Horowitz: Well, I think in part, you know, again, if you think about biologists, they probably didn't even know ten years, but they have the legacy of the systematic relationships--

Vietze: Right.

Horowitz: --that they've acquire--they don't have to know 50 years ago, or 25 years ago, because whatever was established 25 years ago if it has been replicated over and over again and it becomes the basis of the new experiments they don't have to know the history, because they lived with the principles--

Vietze: Right.

Horowitz: --that the history's produced.

Vietze: Right, right. And they really recognize that it is developmental in terms of the field, that one thing depends on the other and builds on the other, and we don't do that.

Horowitz: No.

Vietze: We have to reinvent new methods, new ideas, change the vocabulary and yet it's the same stuff.

Horowitz: The other thing in terms of SRCD that I've been involved in was with the publishing program, and we came to a crisis point and I don't remember the years, so we'll have to put it in, of being very dissatisfied that for a long term publisher of Child Development and all of our materials, the University of Chicago Press, the financial aspect was not great, it wasn't particularly bad but the University of Chicago Press have become very stuck in its ways, and to the great credit of the Governing Council of that time they began to see that we really had to think differently. And so we left the University of Chicago and went with Wiley. At this time Oxford was the other contender and I have to say I was very concerned about going with a for-profit publishing company. I would have probably, if it had been my decision alone, stayed with a university press like Oxford. But it's proved to be a wise decision to have gone with Wiley and they have developed some very good services, all the online access that we now have has been very beneficial and they've been very good to work with. Interestingly, because we've been with Wiley for, I think, 11 or so years, but we've gone out again to solicit proposals, perhaps to re-up with Wiley, but also to get other proposals. And so I'm on the committee, the ad hoc committee that's looking at this--

Both speaking at once

Vietze: Yes, it's always good idea to do that, because otherwise your contractor gets too set in their ways and too complacent. They think they have a life long relationship or maybe an eternal relationship.

Horowitz: Well, SRCD, like all professions, scientific associations, is very dependent on the income from this publisher--

Vietze: Yes.

Horowitz: --and I think one of the challenges is going to be the whole issue of open access set and what that does to the financial underpinnings of most scientific societies.

Vietze: Yes. Well, that's kind of a ubiquitous problem now with--

Horowitz: Yes.

Vietze: --access.

Horowitz: So I think that takes us up to the present and I will probably continue to have some involvement in SRCD. How much more I'll write in the field I don't know.

Vietze: Okay. Thank you very much. Very interesting and an honor, actually, I feel honored.

End of Interview