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Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds

Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte Jr., Debra Skinner, Carole Cain

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This landmark book addresses the central problem in anthropological theory today: the paradox that humans are products of social discipline yet producers of remarkable improvisation.

Synthesizing theoretical contributions by Vygotsky, Bakhtin and Bourdieu, Holland and her co-authors examine the processes by which people are constituted as agents as well as subjects of culturally constructed, socially imposed worlds. They develop a theory of self-formation in which identities become the pivot between discipline and agency: turning from experiencing one's scripted social positions to making one's way into cultural worlds as a knowledgeable and committed participant. They emphasize throughout that "identities" are not static and coherent, but variable, multivocal and interactive.

Ethnographic illumination of this complex theoretical construction comes from vividly described fieldwork in vastly different microcultures: American college women "caught" in romance; persons in U.S. institutions of mental health care; members of Alcoholics Anonymous groups; and girls and women in the patriarchal order of Hindu villages in central Nepal.

Ultimately, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* offers a liberating yet tempered understanding of agency, for it shows how people, across the limits of cultural traditions and social forces of power and domination, improvise and find spaces to re-describe themselves, creating their cultural worlds anew.

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