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Vygotsky's Psychology: A Biography of Ideas (review)

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Judy DeLoach and Alma Gottlieb, *A World of Babies: Imagined Child Care Guides for Seven Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 280 pp.

What would you think of having to give your baby an enema made of the crushed leaves of the kprawkpraw plant and a chili pepper every morning and evening until your baby walks? Every society has taboos about what to avoid during pregnancy. In the West, these include the familiar rule not to smoke, drink caffeine, or consume alcohol in order to avoid harming the fetus; in other societies, such as the Walpiri of the desert of Central Australia, there is a prohibition against eating animals with spikes, such as anteater or possum or the Tiliqua lizard. The stories the imaginary midwives in this book tell of culturally specific ways to deal with childbirth and the upbringing of children make an interesting starting point for culturally informed research on child development. For example, how children learn to speak is a question being researched mostly in Europe and North America, where mothers are said to speak in short sentences—child-directed language—to their babies. The more words a child can speak at the youngest age, the more intelligent he or she appears to be. Not so in the Walpiri culture. The book's Walpiri specialist claims that, although babies make sounds, they are teased and mimicked, in part to keep them from “moving forward” in their language before they are ready. What would Dr. Spock say (and is there a Walpiri Dr. Spock)?

—*Nadja Reissland*

Alex Kozulin, *Vygotsky's Psychology: A Biography of Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, reprinted 1999), 296 pp.

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky was the leading developmental psychologist in the Soviet Union. From literature—his Ph.D. thesis was on *Hamlet*—he moved into the study of language learning and concept use, where he had an important dispute with Jean Piaget. Despite his influence on A. R. Luria and A. N. Leontiev, he died (of tuberculosis in his mid-thirties) before his brilliance and depth were recognized in the West. Work already completed by 1934 thus won widespread attention in the United States only in the 1970s. An initial translation of his essays, *Thought and Language*, was later revised by the young émigré scholar Alex Kozulin, who here offers a report on Vygotsky's gifts to psychology and linguistics. The result can be highly recommended as an account of a major Russian thinker who even now, after the opening of Western minds to Russian thought, deserves wider recognition.

—*Stephen Toulmin*