

TAP 51/4 Fall/Winter 2017G
Book column
Wolff /Chavis
Approx. 1420 words

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The Rapaport-Holt Correspondence (1948-1960)

By Robert R. Holt

Ipbooks.net 2017

Letters Spanning a Dynamic Era in Psychoanalytic Theory

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Both a rare opportunity and a trip into several memory lanes are provided for me in recounting my personal reactions to the *Rapaport-Holt Correspondence (1948-1960)*. It is hard to write such a commentary without remembering the eras these letters span. However, I can state categorically that any analyst interested in issues that range from primary process to stimulus barrier to cognitive styles will find this volume breathtaking.

I came to know Bob Holt when I was a student in the NYU Clinical Psychology Program. At that time, he and George Klein were the co-directors of

the Research Center for Mental Health in the Clinical Doctoral Program. The research center began in 1953 and continued for a while after George Klein's premature death in 1971. I became a student in 1964 when Klein recruited me to join the sleep and dream laboratory at the research center. I had been doing neurophysiological-learning research with Edward Taub for several years. But I was particularly interested in psychoanalysis and doing research related to psychoanalysis.

At that time, the NYU research center provided the New York Psychoanalytic Institute with most of the psychologists who were called research candidates. This included Donald Spence, Leo Goldberger, Fred Pine, Irving Paul, David Wolitsky and George Klein. In addition to this group (Paul and Pine left the center to take other positions) analysts like Robert Langs, Hartvig Dahl and Merton Gill were either frequent visitors or like Dahl and Gill spent a year or several years at the research center.

Under the directorship of Holt and Klein students at the center were not only doing research but constantly hearing about and discussing recent trends in psychoanalysis and psychology. Most (perhaps all) of us were aware of the large shadow cast by the memory of David Rapaport. We discussed with Gill many of his papers, but I remember a long discussion on his paper with Rapaport on the five metapsychological points of view. When Freud's project was published, we

had a luncheon study group that included Klein, Holt, Gill and other faculty members (I am sure of Leo Goldberger and Dahl). This was the atmosphere Holt and Klein provided and in reading the Rapaport–Holt letters one is transported back in time to a period where they were asking the most exquisite and complex questions involving psychoanalytic theory. The important part of their correspondence involves going over some of the basic issues that are raised by both Holt and Rapaport but also their attempt to in some way make a variety of issues subject to empirical tests.

Before I knew better (I was barely out of my teenage years), I heard Rapaport lecture and it took me 15 or 20 years to realize that the research reported by Fred Schwartz and Peter H. Schiller was stimulated by concepts Rapaport put forth that day. One of his projects was devising ways of testing learning theory from a psychoanalytic point of view. He was, as far as I can tell, continuously reading literature from every source I can imagine. Interestingly, Holt was quite similar; I remember passing Bob Holt with a copy of Harold Searles's collected papers. Bob remarked he was surprised at the number of essays and looked at my volume and said he had not read several of the papers. I, of course, was surprised since Bob in my mind was a Freudian, but I didn't realize at the time that he like Rapaport was someone whose critical thinking and mind went beyond the borders of a single theory. In these letters, this is captured and recaptured over a variety of

issues that Arthur Lynch wonderfully summarizes and highlights in his foreword to these letters.

Stimulating Influence on Future Generations

All of us who have dived (prayed) over Chapter 7 of *Interpretation of Dreams* can appreciate the letters between Holt and Rapaport about this historic chapter. Holt and the members of the research center are offering interesting critiques to Rapaport who patiently agrees, then tempers the criticisms put forth. There is a wonderful transcript of Rapaport teaching (leading the discussion) of Chapter 7 to a class at the Western New England Institute and the letters capture much of the same spirit. In this and in many of their interchanges, it is as if one becomes Socrates and is helping the other with the questions that will lead to the beginnings of a fruitful answer. Many of us were fortunate to experience Rapaport's shadow and Holt's presence. With George Klein and Gill they influenced generations of psychoanalysts.

As a personal note, I published a book six or seven years ago entitled *When Theories Touch; A Historical and Theoretical Integration of Psychoanalytic Thought*. In the last chapters of the book I attempted to integrate several psychoanalytic positions. Without reviewing these attempts, I realized that my efforts were stimulated by my time at the research center and the way Bob Holt

and George Klein (two students of Rapaport) helped all of us develop our identities as psychologists and eventually psychoanalysts.

Despite my indebtedness to this training, in many ways I have differed with aspects of the positions that Klein and Holt have put forth. It seems to me that Klein, Holt and Gill, among others, have put forth questions that do not allow theories to touch. When Gill asks, is psychoanalysis a biological or a psychological theory (1976), it seems to me that this question leads to false and unnecessary choices. Similarly, Klein asking whether we are referring to meaning or mechanism implies that we must choose between these alternatives.

My question is whether there can be a psychological theory that considers the possibility of important biological influences. Going one step further, is it possible to posit a theory of drive (endogenous stimulation) without this concept being the major factor of one's theoretical structure? Without attempting to answer this question here, I would state that most theoreticians present dichotomous alternatives in their theoretical preferences. This should be replaced by dynamic multiple factor models that would include biological and psychological variables. These, factors will vary in terms of their importance, depending on whom you are trying to describe or understand and the conditions you are considering.

While I have put forth positions that are at times different from Holt's and Klein's, this has seemed natural and of minor importance. More importantly, I

have valued the people I have met who at one time or another worked at the research center. Of course, I cannot omit that I met my wife Carolyn at the research center. She was working with Don Spence and Lloyd Silverman. Lloyd and his wife Doris, who became our friends, were both there. Sheldon Bach, a supervisor and friend, not only worked at the research center but almost took a position with Rapaport at Austin Riggs. There are many other alumni from these days including Morris Eagle and Leo Goldberger. Arthur Lynch has done a comprehensive job of listing everyone I knew who worked at the research center. It was a wonderful time and Holt and Rapaport have enticingly left us with many well formulated but unanswered issues. Let me end by citing one issue.

Holt for many years worked on what I will call a primary process manual. From my perspective, what Holt has shown us in his research is that there are many steps between primary and secondary process. Put in other terms, these are not dichotomous concepts and a full theory would describe a continuity of experiences between primary and secondary processes. At the very least to describe thoughts in these terms we would need several types of scales looking at the intersection and compromise formations between different types of cognitive processes. Some of this is part of present cognitive research but not in the depth that Holt put forth. In my view, Holt began this project and it is for the present and future generations to finish this endeavor. Reading the Rapaport-Holt

correspondence can offer an important stimulus in understanding the issues involved in this type of, as well as many other, important, empirical/conceptual undertakings.

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