

## Book Review: The Ecology of Human Development by Urie Bronfenbrenner

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Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) was an influential, Russian developmental psychologist. He was mostly known for developing the ecology of human development, which altered the way researchers understand child development in relation to the environment. He earned his bachelor's degree in Psychology and Music in Cornell University. In 1940, he received his Master's degree in Education from Harvard University; and in 1942, he received his Doctoral degree in Psychology from University of Michigan. In 1948, Bronfenbrenner joined the faculty in Cornell University and served there until his journey in this world ended in 2005. He was titled as Jacob Gould Sherman Professor Emeritus of Human Development and Psychology in Cornell University (Ceci, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner was an influential scholar in the field of developmental psychology, creating a new point of view to human development by incorporating the context in which a child develops. According to Bronfenbrenner, the development of human beings is not only psychological, but it consists of four sources: culture, society, economy and politics. The book, in which he explained these sources in relation to the human development process, *The Ecology of Human Development* was accepted as one of his benchmarks. Even though it was criticized, ecological theory is an important contribution to the field, leading to the foundation of Head Start program in United States. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory created the path towards an interdisciplinary approach to human development studies (Ceci, 2006).

### Part One: Ecological Orientation

The book, *The Ecology of Human Development*, consists of four parts. In the first part, Bronfenbrenner explains the perspective behind the ecology model, the purpose and theory's basic concepts. According to his theory, development is a lifelong process which reflects the individual's understanding of the environment and his or her relation to it. This definition is different from the traditional perspective of development, which focuses on the characteristics of the individual and the inheritance. While explaining ecology theory, Bronfenbrenner points out that environment is similar to Russian dolls, various structures nested in each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The core of the environment is the immediate environment of the individual, including himself, which is called as Microsystem. Microsystem includes the relations of the individual with the materials or characters within that system, for example a day care center. In this immediate

setting, the individual has different roles. Microsystem is nested in the Mesosystem, which emphasizes the relationships between two or more settings that the individual interacts with. For example, the relationship between a child's home environment and school environment and how this interaction affects the child developmentally is the focus of Mesosystem. The next environment including the former two is Exosystem. Exosystem is not directly related to the individual's active participation in the environment, but the events occurring in one or more environments that have an effect on the individual leading various effects on the development process. Last one is the Macrosystem; the one accommodates all the environments in it and focuses on the uniformity between the systems. Culture plays a role in Macrosystem as within a culture the environments are expected to be similar, whereas among different cultures, the environments will differ from each other. Therefore, Macrosystem points out the consistencies among the settings in different cultures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) points out that to be able to determine the developmental influences of the environment on the individual, one must observe the individual closely. In addition, as there are many Macrosystems, one must have a theoretical model that will let the observation process be equal among all Macrosystems. Moreover, to derive conclusions about the effects of environment on the development, longitudinal studies must be done (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The first part of the book includes the definitions of basic concepts of Bronfenbrenner's theory. However, the definitions are present not only in the first section but also throughout the book. In addition to the definitions, Bronfenbrenner presents propositions as fundamentals of theory and hypotheses that should go under empirical investigations. At the end of the first section, as the ecology theory is a brand-new theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasizes that the hypotheses included in the book are the ones he foresees as effective on development. Therefore, he implies that the lack of empirical evidence about the validity of the hypotheses should not be approached as drawbacks. Moreover, as it is pointed out earlier, every hypothesis should be based on a theory, and Bronfenbrenner emphasizes that the hypotheses and propositions should be judged in relation to theory.

### **Part Two: Elements of the Setting**

The second part of the book explains how ecological system works in relation to its elements and the individual. Every ecosystem's focus is on the balance of power and each ecosystem is different from each other in regard to imbalance. As ecosystems are unique, they develop their own self-correction techniques (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Setting is defined as environments in which individuals participate in activities and each of them have their roles in that environment. Roles are identified as the actions an individual displays, the expected actions of society on the individual, and the relation of other individuals' actions with the individual. Individuals' roles may change over time, a role transition, which leads to ecological transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

### **Part Three: Analysis of Settings**

With the third section of book, the analysis of the environment is added to the context. Bronfenbrenner (1979) evaluates the environment as an ecological context in terms of laboratory. He proposes that individuals display unique behaviors in every setting as they interact with the environment by ascribing social meaning. Therefore, every unique experience

will affect the behavior being observed in a particular environment. As a result, Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that laboratory studies, especially the ones with infants, do not yield valid data in terms of development if the researcher is not aware of the understanding of the individual. According to ecological theory, the development of individuals should be judged in relation to their environment, not from a well-controlled laboratory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner also points out that to ensure validity, it does not only take an environmental observation or a laboratory-based investigation, but the observer should weigh the meaning of the environment from the eyes of the individual. In addition, the individual should be observed several times. By this way, the validity may be reached. Bronfenbrenner calls this validity as ecological validity (Horowitz, 1980).

#### **Part Four: Beyond the Microsystem**

In the last section of the book, Bronfenbrenner (1979) moves from the more individualized system, microsystem, and focuses on the human development process in mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. These three systems are different than microsystem, as they do not directly influence the individual, but the individual is affected indirectly from the experiences in these ecological systems. Bronfenbrenner points out that the implementations of laws and policies provide changes and transitions in the development of the individual, therefore developmental psychology is in need of social policies (Horowitz, 1980).

#### **Critique**

Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development went through major changes throughout his life time (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This piece is a review of one of his earlier versions of the theory, and this review should be considered accordingly. In later developments of the theory, Bronfenbrenner's focus has shifted from ecology to bioecology, meaning that the individuals are still influenced by their environment and at the same time, their personal characteristics become important; especially through the interactions between the individual and other influencers in each of the systems. Most of his work seems to be focused primarily on the individual surrounded by the systems, but at the same time, Bronfenbrenner had been concerned about the family as an institution (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). However, in this earlier work that I reviewed, his main focus is on the interaction between the individual and the contextual environment that surrounds the individual. He reviews human development from this interaction lens and the proximal processes.

*The Ecology of Human Development*, although the concept has changed and matured over time, is a big contribution to the fields of human development and family science and family psychology as it opened a new door to understand the developmental process of an individual in terms of his or her interactions with the environment. With growing application of the theory and empirical evidence backing up how the theory describes and explains an individual's development, it is safe to say that Ecological Theory will be useful for researchers and family scientists for a long time as long as it is applied correctly in research (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009).

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