

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development

[Psychology](#), [Child Development](#)



BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT Urie Bronfenbrenner was a psychologist who was born in 1917, and he was regarded as one of the world's leading scholars in the field of developmental psychology. His ecological systems theory holds that development reflects the influence of several environmental systems, and it identifies five environmental systems with which an individual interacts. He analyzed four types of systems that aid in human development, they include the microsystem, mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and finally he developed the fifth system, the chronosystem. All these systems as Bronfenbrenner stated have rules, norms, and at the same time roles that shape development of human beings. For example, an inner-city family faces many challenges which an affluent family in a gated community does not, and vice versa. The inner-city family is more likely to experience environmental hardships, like crime and squalor. On the other hand the sheltered family is more likely to lack the nurturing support of extended family. Since its publication in 1979, Bronfenbrenner's major statement of this theory, *The Ecology of Human Development* has had widespread influence on the way psychologists and others approach the study of human beings and their environments. As a result of his groundbreaking work in "human ecology", these environments - from the family to economic and political structures - have come to be viewed as part of the life course from childhood through adulthood. Bronfenbrenner has identified Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky and German-born psychologist Kurt Lewin as important influences on his theory. There are many different theories related to human development. The ecological

theory emphasizes environmental factors as playing the major role to development. Ecological Systems Theory was developed to explain how everything in a child and the child's environment affects how a child grows and develops. He labeled different aspects or levels of the environment that influence children's development including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystme, and chronosystem. It holds that the development is the result of the relationships between people and their environments. Each of these systems depends on the contextual nature of the person's life and offers an overgrowing diversity of options and sources of growth. For example, because we potentially have access to these " systems" we are able to have more social knowledge, an increased set of possibilities for learning problem solving and access to new knowledge (Swick and Williams, 2006). The systems identified by Bonfrenbenner which plays an important role n the human development from childhood to adulthood are: The Microsystem Consisting of the child's most immediate environment (physically, socially and psychologically), this core entity stands as the child's venue for initially learning about the world. As the child's most intimate learning setting, it oi→€ers him or her a reference point of the world. It may provide the nurturing centerpiece for the child or become a haunting set of memories of one's earliest encounters with violence (Rogoï→€, 2003). The real power in this initial set of interrelations with family for the child is what they experience in terms of developing trust and mutuality with their signii→€cant people (Pipher, 1996). The family is clearly the child's early microsystem for learning how to live. The caring relations between child and parents (and many other caregivers) can help to

in turn, influence a healthy personality (Swick, 2004). For example, the attachment behaviors of parents offer children their first trust-building experience (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). It refers to the small, immediate environment the child lives in. Children's microsystems will include any immediate relationships or organizations they interact with, such as their immediate family or caregivers and their school or daycare. How these groups or organizations interact with the child will have an effect on how the child grows; the more encouraging and nurturing these relationships and places are, the better the child will be able to grow. Furthermore, how a child acts or reacts to these people in the microsystem will affect how they treat her in return. Each child's special genetic and biologically influenced personality traits, what is known as temperament, end up affecting how others treat them. It directly impacts the child's development including: family, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peers. The Mesosystems The real power of mesosystems is that they help to connect two or more systems in which child, parent and family live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). They help to move us beyond the dyad or two-party relation. So mesosystems are or should permeate our lives in every dimension. For example, the friend at church who links you up to "parent night out" and then in turn, watches your baby while you attend an evening adult education course is indeed a powerful mesosystem agent. As Mary Pipher (1996) cautions, "community" must become a concrete reality for young children and their parents. There must be loving adults beyond the parents who engage in caring ways with our children. In the ritualistic symbols of many native American people there is a thing called tiospaye which means to be "

in community with each other". This is what mesosystems are about—being in relation with each other in ever expanding circles of triads and even more expansive relations. Without strong mesosystems families tend to fall into chaos (L'Abate, 1990). Bronfenbrenner's next level, the mesosystem, describes how the different parts of a child's microsystem work together for the sake of the child. For example, if a child's caregivers take an active role in a child's school, such as going to parent-teacher conferences and watching their child's soccer games, this will help ensure the child's overall growth. In contrast, if the child's two sets of caretakers, mom with step-dad and dad with step-mom, disagree how to best raise the child and give the child conflicting lessons when they see him, this will hinder the child's growth in different channels. For example, children whose parents have rejected them may have difficulty developing positive relations with teachers. The Exosystem The close, intimate system of our relations within families creates our bui-€er and " nest" for being with each other. However, we all live in systems psychologically and not physically; these are exosystems. For example, parents may physically be at work but psychologically they are very present in the child-care center their child attends. Likewise, the child in i-€irst grade " goes to work" with the parents in the sense that they wonder about and seek experiences with " the work of the family" they never really physically experience (Galinsky, 1999). Exosystems are the contexts we experience vicariously and yet they have a direct impact on us. They can be empowering (as a high quality child-care program is for the entire family) or they can be degrading (as excessive stress at work is on the total family ecology). In so many cases exosystems bring about stress in families

because we do not attend to them as we should. Our absence from a system makes it no less powerful in our lives (Garbarino, 1992). For example, many children realize the stress of their parent's workplaces without ever physically being in these places (Galinsky, 1999). We all need to seek to be involved in our exosystems, encouraging more family-friendly practices. The exosystem level includes the other people and places that the child herself may not interact with often herself but that still have a large affect on her, such as parents' workplaces, extended family members, the neighborhood, etc. It involves links between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the individual's immediate context. For example, a husband's or child's experience at home may be influenced by a mother's experiences at work. The mother might receive a promotion that requires more travel, which might increase conflict with the husband and change patterns of interaction with the child. The Macrosystem The larger systems of cultural beliefs, societal values, political trends, and "community happenings" act as a powerful source of energy in our lives. The macrosystems we live in influence what, how, when and where we carry out our relations (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). For example, a program like Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) may positively impact a young mother through health care, vitamins, and other educational resources. It may empower her life so that she in turn, is more effective and caring with her newborn (Swick, 2004). In a sense, the macrosystems that surround us help us to hold together the many threads of our lives. Without an umbrella of beliefs, services, and supports for families, children and their parents are open to great harm and deterioration (Garbarino, 1992). It is the largest and

most remote set of people and things to a child but which still has a great influence over the child. The macrosystem includes things such as the relative freedoms permitted by the national government, cultural values, the economy, wars, etc. These things can also affect a child either positively or negatively. It describes the culture in which individuals live. Cultural contexts include developing and industrialized countries, socioeconomic status, poverty, and ethnicity. A child, his or her parent, his or her school, and his or her parent's workplace are all part of a large cultural context. Members of a cultural group share a common identity, heritage, and values. The macrosystem evolves over time, because each successive generation may change the macrosystem, leading to their development in a unique macrosystem. The Chronosystems Framing all of the dynamics of families is the historical context as it occurs within the different Swick and Williamssystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). For example, the " history" of relationships in families may explain more about parent-child relations than is evident in existing dynamics (Ford & Lerner, 1992). Another example is the powerful influence that historical influences in the macrosystem have on how families can respond to different stressors. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests strongly that, in many cases, families respond to different stressors within the societal parameters existent in their lives. During the Great Depression of the 1930's many families simply were ecstatic to have food and did not have the luxury to worry about the nutritional value of the food they had on the table. Yet they were concerned but the macrosystem elements present in their lives that established the limited vision they could have regarding these issues (Swick & Graves, 1993). All of the systems

in addition, influence family functioning, they are dynamic and interactive—fostering a framework for parents and children. Our understanding of the “ contexts” in which family stressors occur can help us in being effective helpers. It is the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course, as well as sociohistorical circumstances. For example, divorces are one transition. Researchers have found that the negative effects of divorce on children often peak in the first year after the divorce. By two years after the divorce, family interaction is less chaotic and more stable. An example of sociohistorical circumstances is the increase in opportunities for women to pursue a career during the last thirty years. In the analysis made by Swick and Williams (2006) of this Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner for Early Childhood Education and its implications for working with families experiencing stress, they mentioned that today's families face many stressors during the early childhood years. Particular stressors like homelessness, violence, and chemical dependence, play havoc with the family system. Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological perspective offers an insightful lens for understanding and supporting families under stress. Understanding families as they experience stress is important to early childhood educators. It is critical that as professionals we reach out to help families and to base this help on understandings that are research based and of value to enhance families (Swick, 2004). Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) bio-ecological perspective offers insights that can enhance our understanding of families. It also provides concepts we can use in crafting empowering relations with families. It is important to note that in our advocacy and support of families we must use Bronfenbrenner's constructs

with his own caution of "do no harm" to families. Thus, we must avoid categorizing, stereotyping, and impeding families through the work and relations we develop with them (Swick, 2004). Instead, we need to use these concepts in ways that strengthen our relations with families.

Bronfenbrenner's approach to understanding families is helpful because it is inclusive of all of the systems in which families are enmeshed and because it reflects the dynamic nature of actual family relations (Garbarino, 1992). It is also based on the idea of empowering families through understanding their strengths and needs. Thus, we first examine the key elements of Bronfenbrenner's systems thinking with regards to family functioning. Each family and each person experiences stress in unique ways. However, we have learned insights related to how many families respond to different stressors, thus increasing our potential to assist families in their challenges (Garbarino, 1992). Because family stressors are varied and have multiple elements, it is impossible to stereotype families in relation to their stress dynamics (Bromer, 2002). We can gain insights related to patterns of family responses to various stress syndromes but must be cautious as to how we use these generalizations in our work with families. We must always follow the admonition "do no harm" as we seek to understand and support families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Three stress syndromes that create serious problems within families are: (1) chemical dependency, (2) family violence, and (3) homelessness. We use these stress contexts as examples of how the ecology of family life is influenced and indeed challenged by such powerful forces. With regard to the implication of this theory in education, it has been said that primary relationship must be intended to last a lifetime. Therefore,

teachers need to work to support the primary child adult relationship. Schools should create an environment that welcomes and nurtures families, and education should foster societal attitudes that value all work done on behalf of children. Kipp, et. al, as well as Watts et. al have mentioned in their book about the contributions and critiques in the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development. The ecological perspective provides a much richer description of environment and environmental influences than anything offered by learning theorists. Each of us functions in particular Microsystems that are linked by a mesosystem and embedded in the larger contexts of an exosystem and a macrosystem. It makes little sense to an ecological theorist to study environmental influences in laboratory contexts. Instead, they argue that only by observing transactions between developing children and their ever changing natural settings will we understand how individuals influence and are influenced by their environments. Yet, despite its strengths, the Ecological Systems Theory falls far short of being a complete account of human development. It is characterized as a bio-ecological model, but it really has very little to say about specific biological contributors to development. Bronfenbrenner's theory intended to offer a conceptual framework for analyzing psychological life in terms of three predominant factors: activity, role, and relation, as they manifest across different levels of social influence. In this way, it draws attention to the importance of individual differences in development and implicitly support the need for an increasing amount of cross-cultural and localized developmental research. Bronfenbrenner's model provides, in total, a strong theoretical and research means through which the influence of the environment as a whole can be

factored into individual or social accounts of human development. Furthermore, it seems that this ecological theory of development can be used in conjunction with which to supplement more isolated individualist accounts of psychosocial development. The ecological model of Bronfenbenner is a very recent one, and the field of developmental psychology has, at the time of writing, offered few real critiques of his approach. There are, however, two basic criticisms one might be able to level against this theory. The first is that while he has plotted an account that does not seem to underestimate the complexity of development it does appear that it may be a difficult explanatory model to apply. There are two main reasons for this. First, Bronfenbrenner requires an extensive scope of ecological detail with which to build up and substantiate an adequate developmental account. The breadth of his model would seem to suggest that almost everything within an individual's developmental environment could potentially play some role in their development. While this may well be true, and while this level of detail and complexity may be necessary for an adequate developmental account, we need to ask at what point one has enough detail and information to mount a tentative explanation for behavior personality. Second, whereas earlier developmental accounts sought the answers for development outcomes in immediate familial or social surroundings (as in Freud and Erikson's theories, respectively), Bronfenbrenner's scope of developmental influences seemingly knows no bounds, and this makes his model difficult to apply in a balanced way. It is often difficult to collect so much information, and when one has so much information, it becomes difficult to hierarchies according to the relative

importance of developmental influence. Another problem stems from this contention: if Bronfenbrenner is right that we need to conceptualize developmental influences only in systems terms, then the smallest factor of influence needs to be understood only as a part component of a complex multifaceted system of influence. Because all factors of development are mutually and systematically influential, it seems that we need to take all such factors into account when trying to establish the significance of even the smallest developmental variable. This fact once again makes the complexity of Bronfenbrenner's model practically unwieldy. The same holds sophisticated and complex nature of his model, which prevents it from being reductionist, also makes it very difficult and complicated to implement practically. Moreover, it integrates multiple influences on child development, but it does not provide detailed mechanisms for development. Sources: [www. wikipedia. com](http://www.wikipedia.com) [www. slideshare. com](http://www.slideshare.com) Kipp, et. al " Developmental Psychology" Watts etl. al " Developmental Psychology: Childhood and Adolescence" Early Childhood Education Journal, Vol. 33, No. 5, April 2006