

Urie Bronfenbrenner

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Urie Bronfenbrenner (born April 29, 1917, Moscow, Russia – died September 25, 2005, Ithaca, New York, U.S.) was a Russian-born American developmental psychologist. He is best known for ecological systems theory. This theory explains human development as the result of nested relationships between the individual and family, friends, schools, neighborhoods, society, and the time period in which the individual lived. Bronfenbrenner described these contexts as, matryoshka, or Russian nesting dolls. The individual was layered within multiple contexts, or systems and each system was represented by one of the nested dolls. The ecological system of each individual was built from five separate but interactive systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem.

Bronfenbrenner's family moved from Russia to the United States when he was six years old. He later studied music and psychology at Cornell University, and earned his bachelor's degree in 1938. He earned a master's degree in education from Harvard University in 1940. In 1942, he graduated from the University of Michigan with his Ph.D. in developmental psychology. Bronfenbrenner served as a military psychologist during World War II, where he evaluated individuals for work on top secret missions. Later, he joined the faculty at the University of Michigan as an assistant professor. In 1948 he moved to Cornell University where he was a professor of human development for the remainder of his nearly 60 year career. While at Cornell, Bronfenbrenner was a founder of the Head Start program. Head Start was created in

1965 to provide educational, health and other support services to impoverished children. At the time of his death Bronfenbrenner held the position of Jacob Gould Schurman Professor Emeritus of Human Development and Psychology at Cornell University. Bronfenbrenner was married to Liese Price for 63 years, and they had six children.

Bronfenbrenner was fascinated by the impact that socio-cultural context, or environment, had on child outcomes. When Bronfenbrenner was a child, his father, a neuropathologist, often discussed the interdependence between living organisms and their surroundings with his son. Later, when he was employed at Letchworth Village, a New York institution for the developmentally disabled, Bronfenbrenner's father expressed his frustration with the York juvenile court system because it regularly institutionalized healthy, typically developing children. These early influences, combined with his training as a developmental psychologist, led Bronfenbrenner to theorize about the ecology of human development. Cross-cultural field research conducted in places such as Europe, the U.S.S.R., Israel, and China resulted in further refinement of his theory. Bronfenbrenner's theory transformed the way that social and behavioral scientists approached the study of human beings and their environments.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is based on the idea that the individual's interaction with the socio-cultural context ultimately leads to the development of a unique personality. Human development is defined as a lasting change in the way a person perceives and adjusts to their environment. Children are defined as growing and dynamic entities that move within the environment and change the environment. In turn, the environment influences the child. Human development, therefore, is the interaction between the individual and the environment. Development also varies by place and time, and public policy affects human development through its impact on the conditions of our lives.

Ecological Systems Theory identifies five nested layers of an individual's environment: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The microsystem has the strongest influence on individual development. It includes genetics, internal drives, and interactions between the child and other people, such as parents, teachers, and friends. The mesosystem is the interaction between two microsystems, such as parents interacting with teachers. The exosystem is defined as environments that the individual is not a part of but have an impact upon them. For example, a parent's workplace is part of a child's exosystem. The macrosystem includes national social conditions, cultural trends, and the laws that govern the nation or state. Finally, the chronosystem, or the events that happen in the individual's life, directly impacts all other layers of the environment. Each system has a bi-directional and dynamic relationship with the other systems. Changes at any level of the system result in changes at the other levels. Later, Bronfenbrenner worked with another developmental psychologist, Stephen J. Ceci, to extend ecological systems theory to behavior genetics.

Bronfenbrenner received numerous national and international awards and honors for his work, including multiple honorary degrees and invitations to contribute to two U.S. Presidential Task Forces. In 1993 he received the James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award from the Association for Psychological Science. In 1996 he received the Lifetime Contribution to Developmental Psychology in the Service of Science and Society Award, which is now named in his honor. Bronfenbrenner wrote over 300 journal articles, book chapters, and books across his career. His books include *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.* (1970), *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (1979), *The State of Americans: This Generation and the Next* (1996), *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological perspectives on Human Development* (2005).

Further Reading

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