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The Urie Bronfenbrenner Top 19: Looking Back at His Bioecological Perspective

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Urie Bronfenbrenner Top 19: Looking Back at His Bioecological Perspective

Making Human Beings Human. Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development,
by Urie Bronfenbrenner (Ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005, 336 pp., \$85.95 (cloth),
\$39.95 (paper).

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Urie Bronfenbrenner had a major influence in human development research and theory, developmental psychology, and formulation of social policy. This book, *Making Human Beings Human*, brings together his own selection of his papers from across his career, along with a few papers by others that summarize or extend his work. Richard Lerner wrote a Foreword to the book, and Stephen Hamilton and Stephen Ceci wrote an Afterword. For students and scholars who would like Bronfenbrenner's own Top 19 in one place, with the added benefit of comparing the various conceptual formulations over time, this is a very nice collection to have.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model surely is among the most widely cited and frequently taught in human development. The famous conceptual models that Bronfenbrenner brought the field are reprised in the book. The macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem—the four ecological levels nested together that organize the social ecology of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)—are summarized here. Another chapter outlines the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model, which is at the core of the bioecological framework. The PPCT models an active person enmeshed in an active, dynamic, social-ecological system, which was Bronfenbrenner's later framework reemphasizing developmental change and the individual in context.

The model presented in *The Ecology of Human Development* evolved in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) thinking over a long time, and changed thereafter, which is a theme of the book. Robert and Beverly Cairns provide an article (1995), "Social Ecology Over Time and Space," which goes back to papers by Bronfenbrenner written in the early 1940s that already show, 65 years

ago, many of the key ideas in his work thereafter. Bronfenbrenner includes a selection from his own Ph.D. dissertation (1942) in which he comments that “the proper evaluation of social status and structure requires the envisagement of both the individual and the group as developing organic units” (p. 26). The papers reflect and cite a variety of influences, including Lewin, Vygotsky, Luria, many other contemporaries, and the many students who have worked with Bronfenbrenner and gone on to distinguished careers of their own, some of whom are coauthors of articles in the collection.

Bronfenbrenner divided the selections into two parts: “On the Nature of Bioecological Theory and Research,” and “Using the Ecology of Human Development to Enhance the Human Condition.” The policy papers in the second part of the book still resonate today. Among many policy roles, Bronfenbrenner was one of the original advisors in planning Head Start. He includes a paper attacking the allocation-of-variance paradigm for understanding environment and genetic determinants of IQ (1975). He urges researchers to assess policy changes that are, in his view, endangering the family; he advocates rigorous evaluations of these “natural experiments” to expose their harm to parents and children (1988). In 1970, he dissented from a White House conference on children by calling for family supports for *all* parents (not only the poor) to ensure that they have more time with their children, fewer disruptions due to work requirements, and better leave and child care supports and facilities. Bronfenbrenner called for social policies that supported much more time for parent and family interactions with children, without the chaos, stress, and inconsistency that he saw as a growing problem in the United States. A well-known quote of Bronfenbrenner’s captures a theme throughout his applied and policy work: “A child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care of and in joint activity with that child. In short, *somebody has to be crazy about that kid*” (p. 262). Society, he says, needs to provide time, resources, and contexts sufficient for this relationship to develop.

Lerner’s Foreword recalls some of the other famous quotes on the importance of naturalistic research that Bronfenbrenner is known for. Arguably the most famous phrase: “Much of developmental psychology, as it now exists, is *the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time*” (1979, p. 19). Another, from Bronfenbrenner’s (1970) study of childhood in the then USSR and the United States:

How can we judge the worth of a society? Many indices could be used for this purpose, among them the Gross National Product, the birth rate, crime statistics, and mental health data. In this book, we propose yet another criterion: *the concern of one generation for the next.* (p. 216)

Bronfenbrenner advocated all kinds of experiments, particularly those in natural settings, to understand the *accommodation* or fit between person and environment. It is not easy to see accommodation, he says, because it seems “natural” and is so deeply a part of everyday life. His solution for how to see accommodation offers another iconic quotation:

If looking is not enough, what is one to do? How can the observer quicken his sensitivity to the critical features of the observed? The answer to the question was given me forty years ago, long before I was ready to appreciate it, by my first mentor in graduate school, Walter Fenno Dearborn. In his quiet, crisp New England accent he once remarked, “Bronfenbrenner, *if you want to understand something, try to change it.* [Such experiments are a way to achieve] the juxtaposition of the similar but different.” (p. 37)

Bronfenbrenner helped to push developmental research out of exclusively laboratory settings into naturalistic observations of children and their settings in the sociocultural contexts of everyday life and to use natural experiments to critique policy changes affecting parents and children.

Bronfenbrenner provided conceptual models and frameworks, not predictive theory. Rather, he advocated empirical tests in particular instances to see cause in context. He argues for the *potential* relevance of all the many factors in the models, rather than specifically predicting in advance what causes what. Causal arrows are not a feature of the bioecological models. Evolutionary final causes or psychodynamic theories of learning and memory, for example, offer hypotheses about why certain patterns in mating, or parenting exist and why (e.g., they confer advantages for reproductive success), or which features of mind might influence learning and how they do so (e.g., memory stores events with a fearful or negative valence more strongly). Right or wrong—they can be tested. Bronfenbrenner's model is not a grand causal theory that advocates for one set of causal factors, or one theory of learning or development, over others. His models tell us to look closely at the whole and then decide. Bronfenbrenner emphasized that “the action is in the interactions” among a variety of causal factors.

Bronfenbrenner advocated research that delved much deeper into the influence of settings rather than social address categories, or group labels. He wanted specifications of “social class,” “age,” “sibling status” in richer, more contextual detail than the category alone. Each level of the ecological model or PPCT model holds some of the components of what it meant to be poor, or a third-born girl in a family, he might argue. Bronfenbrenner believed that bioecological research at its best would discover, at each level and for each social context, how that particular feature played out. His framework encouraged looking for connections within and across the various levels of the ecological model, and disaggregating general categories.

Bronfenbrenner (1972) wrote a famous comparative book contrasting Soviet childhood and the United States, from which a chapter is included. He certainly appreciated that cross-cultural research provides ecological contrasts to the United States otherwise unavailable to science. He also used cross-national evidence from Europe in his policy work on the deficits in child care and family policy in the United States. Yet it is fair to say that his work does not test his bioecological model using cross-cultural evidence, nor does he make use of other formulations of the ecology of human development that were and are available in the social sciences, particularly cross-cultural models and evidence from anthropology that were available throughout his career (LeVine, 2007). For example, the psychocultural model was available (Whiting, 1963; Whiting & Whiting, 1975) well before Bronfenbrenner's book appeared in 1979. Psychocultural models such as these grew out of yet earlier studies, including research in the United States (e.g., Vogt & Albert, 1967). The psychocultural model, for example, begins with the environment and ecology (e.g., climate) and the history of a community, which shapes the “maintenance systems” that make it possible for that community to adapt and survive (e.g., subsistence and means of production; patterns of settlement, social structure, defense, law and social control, and the division of labor). These in turn shape *the child's learning environment* (e.g., behavior settings and who is in them, relationship patterns, teachers, caretakers, tasks, workload), which in turn shapes the individual learning and beliefs (e.g., behavioral styles, skills, abilities, values and priorities, conflicts, defenses) of each child and adult. These beliefs in turn shape the shared cultural models (e.g., religion, magical beliefs, rituals and ceremony, art and recreation, games

and play, etc.), which vary around the world and recursively influence the other components. Such models offer causal hypotheses as well. For example, maternal workload, the multiage, multisex child play group, or larger extended families are predicted to influence parenting, gender development, and child nurturance and responsibility in specific ways through specific mechanisms.

It remains puzzling that Bronfenbrenner did not make more use of sister disciplines already studying ecology and development so deeply. Perhaps one reason for why Bronfenbrenner's development of an ecological approach in psychology did not take much account of anthropology is that disciplines are insular and protective, and that even very interdisciplinary scholars like Bronfenbrenner needed to present an ecological approach developed from the psychology discipline to their own discipline for it to be taken up. Bronfenbrenner, after all, was working to reform developmental research in *psychology*. Models from anthropology borrowed whole cloth perhaps were less likely to diffuse into psychology.

Similarly, the cultural learning environment and the importance of the subjective experience of participants in settings, although certainly included in Bronfenbrenner's framework, are not as heavily emphasized as they might have been. One reading of Bronfenbrenner's model circa 1979 is that it makes culture, and the subjective experience of participants, far too distal (it is placed far out in the macrosystem). Another reading, though, comes from his later formulations. In a paper with Stephen Ceci (1993), included in this book, Bronfenbrenner argues that proximal mental processes (perception, cognition, motivation, emotion) "involve psychological content: They are about *something*. . . . Much of that content is in the outside world. . . . In humans, the content turns out, early on, to be mainly about people, objects, and symbols" (p. 177). This suggests that his perspective became more compatible with an embedded, cultural learning environment approach to culture and context in later formulations. Bronfenbrenner certainly appreciated the importance of phenomenological approaches to understanding the meaning of settings. He himself may not have done such research, but his later model points a way to such work.

Michael Cole wrote a Foreword to *The Ecology of Human Development* in 1979. Cole hoped that the effect of that book would be the reorienting of psychology to be the study of psychological processes as properties of whole systems in which the individual is but one element in the person–environment interaction. Explanations for human behavior in natural settings, Cole said, are of the form "it all depends"—it depends on understanding person–environment interaction in each particular context. Indeed, the bioecological model has made some of its greatest contributions by always driving developmental research towards context, into the family, peer group, school, neighborhood, community, and wider society. It also is relentlessly transactional and relational; the individual mutually constitutes his or her environment in relationships with others, and the setting and ecology interacts with the person. The "four levels" of the ecological model, and the Context in PPCT, perhaps have functioned in psychology partly as icons to rally around, and as comprehensive mnemonics that continue to have a valuable role in always keeping ecology and human development together in mind. *Making Human Beings Human* reminds us that this was not always the case, that human development needs to be much more about settings and contexts rather than exclusively about individual differences, and that this intellectual project, so importantly influenced by Urie Bronfenbrenner, requires constant renewal and investment for new generations.

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