

Web Quest Project Theory Fact Sheet of Urie Bronfenbrenner

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Urie Bronfenbrenner has created the ecological systems theory, which he has renamed the Bioecological System theory fairly recently. The Bioecological System is the combination of the child's biological disposition and environmental forces coming together to shape the child's development. Bronfenbrenner says that there are two environmental conditions that are necessary for human development. The first is that one or more adults must love the child unconditionally; the second is that the adults must encourage the child and spend time doing joint activities with the child in and out of the home environment. In order to understand Bronfenbrenner's theory, think of a series of concentric circles, where the smallest circle in the center of all the circles is the child. Bronfenbrenner refers to the child as being in a nested environment. The child, who contains various systems within him or herself, is at the center of the nest, surrounded by layers, which contain individuals and groups of individuals in each layer. The child is the innermost egg that is nested within the other environments that are also nested within each other. Another way to describe it is to think about it in terms of a rock being thrown into the water. The rock in the middle is the child and the ripple effects around that rock are the other nested environments.

The parents, teachers and anyone in a close relationship for a substantial amount of time with the child are in that first ripple. It is called the micro system. The people in the Microsystems have the most immediate effect on the child. Bronfenbrenner uses a term bi-directional to describe the influential interactions that take place between mother and child, child and father, child and teacher, understanding that the influences go both (bi) directions. Bidirectional influences take place when individuals and groups of individuals interact and directly affect others who exist within the same layer, as well as those who are in the layers on either side of them. As related in Danforth, Barkley and Stokes' research, "Bronfenbrenner emphasizes that to understand child development at this level, we must keep in mind that all relationships are bidirectional. That is, adults affect children's behavior, but children's biologically and socially influenced characteristics (their physical attributes, personalities, and capacities) also affect the behavior of adults. For example, a friendly, attentive child is likely to evoke positive and patient reactions from parents, whereas a distractible youngster is more likely to be responded to with restriction and punishment." (2000, Berk, p. 27). As an infant, most likely the only systems in the infant's microsystems would be their parents and sibling(s), or caregivers of daycare for any infant attending that daycare. As a child grows to school age, their microsystems grows to include their daycare center and elementary school because the child spends much of the day there. The important aspect of the Microsystems is the direct contact and interaction with the child. No system is considered a microsystem in this theory if it is not in direct contact with the child for a substantial period of time. The next layer is the mesosystem. The mesosystem consists of the "connections between children's immediate settings and surroundings...It encompasses connections between microsystems, such as home, school, neighborhood, and child-care center, that foster children's development."(2000,Berk, p.28)

The exosystem surrounds the mesosystem and refers to social settings that affect the child but do not include the child, such as the parent's workplace or health services in the community. Again, using a child as our focus, we can say the exosystem doesn't

cross the child's path directly. Indirectly, an exosystem can have a huge affect on the child. For example, if a parent works for a company that doesn't have a flexible work schedule and the child is ill and needs attention, the parent may not be able to come home and take care of the child. The parent may need to ask a neighbor or someone who may not be as nurturing to take care of the child. Also, this puts a lot of stress on the parent if a workplace is not flexible. The parent may not be able to spend as much quality time with the child as needed. The outermost layer which envelopes the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem is called the macrosystem. The macrosystem consists of things that influence and sometimes support the child within the environment such as cultures, norms, and laws.

The chronosystem involves the, "temporal changes in children's environment, which produce new conditions that affect development. These changes can be imposed externally or arise from within the organism, since children select, modify, and create many of their own settings and experiences." (2000, Berk, p. 30) These changes can take place on a daily or frequent basis. In a child's life, there will be events, such as a death of a family member, a teacher's mid-year retirement or a change in the family structure that can change the conditions of that child's life. Bronfenbrenner believes these new conditions can affect a child's development. It is not just environmental types of changes that affect a child's development. A child can experience developmental changes due to internal changes. As stated earlier, "...since children select, modify, and create many of their own settings and experiences...children are both products and producers of their own development." (2000, Berk, p. 30).

How do nature and nurture interact in this theory? Earlier we stated that according to Bronfenbrenner, there are two environmental conditions that are necessary for human development: loving a child unconditionally and spending time with the child. If these two things don't happen, our ecology breaks down causing us to attack and destroy our young. This is already happening in today's American society: school shootings, gang violence, mothers who use drugs while they are pregnant, juvenile delinquency, and teenage pregnancy.

Bronfenbrenner suggests some causes and suggestions to stop this breakdown of ecology:

- 1) Many American families don't live close enough to rely on one another for the necessary support needed to nurture a family. We need to help support our children even after they reach the age of 18. We must keep our families together. This is important for teaching children values and culture and also provides support for the young parents.
- 2) Many neighborhoods are not safe -- we need to have extended families living together again and a community where everyone knows their neighbors.
- 3) Many families are experiencing stress trying to balance work and family.
- 4) All families do not benefit from certain laws that are presently in effect.

It is society's responsibility to make changes that help parents support their children. It is a burden to put the responsibility on children, for instance, when we present programs such as drug prevention too early. It is too much for the children to handle. They cannot really change the conditions in society. This ends up being unfair and ineffective for children. Children need to be around people who will help them make

the right decisions. Knowing this, we as teachers can help parents to find what they need to raise their children properly. Our society does not make it easy for parents to get the help they need. By the time they are done demonstrating how they qualify for help, families feel pretty inadequate [Bronfenbrenner, 1978].

What are the implications of this theory for teaching children and working with parents? Bronfenbrenner states that we must build bridges between home and school. Parents must realize that teachers cannot do all the work themselves and vice versa. Teachers should help children learn to read and parents must help reinforce that learning at home. Schools must get involved with community projects. That involvement can extend to the home by having children and their family members also contribute to the community. The extended family is also very important in the child's schooling. Teachers could invite grandparents into the classroom and have them tell stories about their culture so the children can feel proud of their heritage. Teachers and schools need to extend, to the working parents, as many options as possible to allow them to get involved in their child's education. This needs to happen because there are so many hurdles that working parents face, such as inflexible work schedules and limited sick leave; "time off work" may mean ends won't meet. Open communication with the parents as well as the student is imperative for the success of the child. One of the most important factors to keep in mind in the classroom while interacting with the children is this: Bronfenbrenner would tell us to remember that everything we do and say, not only to the child, but to the people, who have everyday contact and influence over that child, will affect the child's development. It may even change a child's development. Think hard about what you want to teach, say and do.

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