

Application of the ecological system theory with respect to Bronfenbrenner's perspective

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Abstract

Experience interacting with world around us helps us learn. Behavior impacts learning as well as personality. Psychologists study learning in various aspects of our social and ecological environments, in addition to groups of individuals and individuals themselves, in order to understand human behavior. Developmental psychology is concerned with how people develop, learn and grow throughout the course of the lifecycle, and adult learning is one area that developmental psychologists are increasingly making further inquire into. Developmental psychology has been shaped by three main theories: nature versus nurture, continuity versus stage, and stability versus change. However, another theory which has brought considerable debate and discussion within the field of developmental psychology is the Ecological Model that was first put forward by Urie Bronfenbrenner.

Key words: ecological system, Behavior, psychology, learning and development

Introduction

The Ecological Model is based on the idea that children and their various environments; home, school, neighborhood, city, state, and the world at large interact with one another and impact one another directly and indirectly. Although the theory is applied, for the most part, on the context of the child, there are some studies that view it through the lens of the adult world. This essay will focus on two applications of the Ecological Model as it impacts adults. One application deal with the impacts of the college culture on international students. The second one takes place in

the context of business management and leadership. The essay begins with a background and description of the model, followed by an evaluative critique of the model. And finally, a description of the two above mentioned ways in which the model has been applied to an adult context.

The interaction between the child and his or her environment different hypothesis

Adult learning specialists agree that adults learn best when the learning process coincides with application to real-life. Theorists such as Erickson (1963), Livinson (1994), and Merriam (2007) attempted to define the stages of adult development in relation to commonly occurring themes. Whereas Bronfenbrenner's work provides great insight on child development; however, it can also be adapted to the study and analysis on adult learning. His focus on the interaction between the child and his or her environment and the reverse has been adapted to work in a variety of fields, such as child care, youth work, social work, and others. He was concerned about the alienation of children and their subsequent anti-social behaviors in response to neglect. Many of the principles he introduced have become models for the way education can help troubled youth (Hobbs, 1982 cited Brendtro, L., 2006 p. 103). His theory has helped shed light on the need to offer communities support to aid the intellectual, emotional, and moral development of individuals. The Ecological Model is organized into five systems (components) which represent the inter-relations between the individual child and his or her immediate environment and the large world:

1. The microsystems: it is the first stage within the systems. It consists of those in immediate contact with the child e.g. family, siblings, peers and teachers. The microsystem starts off limited and becomes more complex as the child begins forming more relationships. Not only do these influence the child, but the child also impacts on his or her immediate environment.
2. The mesosystems: is the second system identified. It consists of the relationships and interaction between those in each Microsystem. It identified the interrelationships, connections and links made in the microsystems. " development is likely to be optimized by strong supportive links between microsystems" (Shaffer, 2002 p. 26).
3. The exosystem: is the third system. This includes the social settings in the child's life. The child may not have a direct or active role with these settings, but they still affect the child e.g.

parents job, community resources, employment and reaction affiliation. More examples includes: family extended, education system, government agencies and mass media.

4. Macrosystem: it refers to wider society. It includes the values, laws, traditions, belief patterns and culture of the people in which the child lives. It “dictates how children should be treated, what they should be taught, and the goals for which they should strives” (Shaffer, 2002 p. 61) e.g. good and bad choices, goals, study, marriage and son on.

5. Chronosystem: it deals with changing socio-historical circumstances. Each generation has different experiences. Changes in the ecological system can affect the child’s development. Cognitive and biological changes can occur during puberty e.g. changing circumstances (old age), different generation, changing families, belief and values. In the outcome of these five phases it can be said that the theory focuses on child development within the context of social relationships and environment influence. Each system interacts and influences one another. Strong links between systems encourages development. The theory has clear relevance to social care and it can be used also as a way to understand the psychology adult learning.

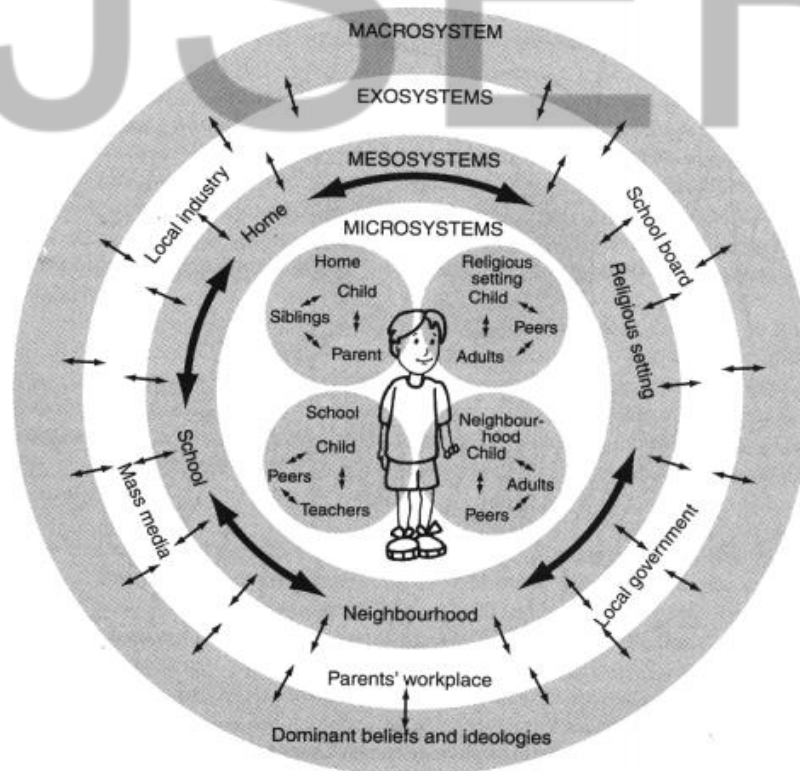


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Model as Applied to a young child's development environment

It is commonly understood that students, adult in particular learn differently. "The learning attitudes, styles and approaches of high school students are different from those of over eighteen years old college students in particular, the approaches, styles and attitudes of adult learners differ yet again" (Oblinger, 2003 p. 37). Qualities and characteristics of adult development are increasingly of interest to developmental psychologists, and also to adult educators, recently educational psychologists devoted much attention to adults. This is due, primarily to the members of adult who aimed continuously education and training and this due to occupational demands and vocational interests (ibid)

Bronfenbrenner used his theory to highlight the problems the modern provides to family life. He believed that society revolves around the work place that the family takes second place to it. He also noticed the lack of support given to struggling families, and the fact that they had to admit to not being able to cope in order to get any assistance. He views the unstable economic environment that people live in as having detrimental affection the family and the parent child relationship. This theory states that if child doesn't have a proper interaction in its microsystem he or she will fail to properly explore the rest of their environment. This can then lead to anti-social behavior and lack of self-direction. Bronfenbrenner thought that the idea that schools could take over the families' primary role was only ignoring the problem. He believed in the importance of the teachers' role in complementing family life. For this reason he used his theory to co-found the 'Head start program'. This program provides, school readiness program to disadvantaged children who are under age of five and it helps them develop their cognitive and social abilities.

Beside that the early stages of child's life been affected by the five phases as Bronfenbrenner's theory dealt with and this later on can affect the adult as an extend from the early stages of live. Adult development is affected by a wide variety of factors consider that on the top of the variables already discussed, people now have another powerful influence: the role of technology in people's development as human.

The framework of the ecological model is based upon the person-their environment, background, and relationships. Everyone goes through changes and transitions throughout the course of their

life. Social environmental aspects, such as family relationships, mental health problems, educational problems, and overall health are parts of the ecological model. The model contextualizes these aspects of a person's life and enables researchers to study them more closely. For example, the ecological model in this way allows researchers to explore parental roles at the microsystem level and interactions with child's school at the mesosystem level (Hepworth, et al, 2010 p.16).

Ecological systems theory concentrates on the aspects of environmental development with also a focus on youth (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). From perspective of some observer, there is a little that an observer can do about one person's life as framed by the microsystem apart from person's interaction. In Similar, the macrosystem and chronosystem are too broad scale for an observer to encompass. In the meantime, the macrosystem and chronosystem both phases are interpretable through understanding different environmental, sociological, and time impacts that influence a person (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner (1994) cautions that an individual needs to go "beyond the easiest labels of culture and class to know and identify particular psychological and social features at the macrosystem phase" (p. 40). While the microsystem provides similar challenges, as an individual cannot understand all the varieties elements close to the individual that impact his or her development. The mesosystem and exosystem are much simple to observe, as both result from the interactions between other phases, such as between microsystems. The exosystem is the outer impacts upon the microsystem (ibid).

Bronfenbrenner's concentrates on development, specifically, in children makes application of ecological systems theory to adults in some limits it is more difficult than might otherwise occur. Even though, the studies made by Bronfenbrenner (1994) the analysis of the study demonstrates the factors, such as mother's education, family situation and bright weight impact childhood development. The term outer factors affecting a person make sense. Finally understanding that the time one develops in, beside that the passage of time, both affects psychology development is a significant concept. Then alter individual development and in specific these two phases of Bronfenbrenner's theory are more connected to the core of this essay subject which is Psychology of Adult Learning. Bronfenbrenner (1994) considers the

timing of events, as they occur within other activities during an individual's life, as important to overall development.

As previously mentioned, the ecological system theory focuses on the child and his or her interaction with their environment and the reverse (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Several researchers support Bronfenbrenner's theory (Elder, 1998). In Elder's research, he illustrated the use of the ecological model in his studies on the temporary multi-generational effects as the result of major catastrophic events, such as wars and economic crises (ibid). Conversely, Bronfenbrenner's work complements other established research on human development, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Kohlberg and Hersh's moral development theory (Maslow, 1943; Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977).

Application of the ecological system theory with respect to Bronfenbrenner's perspective

There is considerable research about the impact of peers on college students. Research has provided numerous examples of empirical evidence that demonstrates peer influence impacts learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Bronfenbrenner suggested that peer influence can be explained through an ecological model where the student is the center of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989, 1993). At the same time, there has been some promising research previously conducted that have come close to exemplifying the ecological model. Research, such as that done by Huebner and Moos, examined the relationship of physical spaces to people's interactions with one another and the process and contextual components of peer influence on the racial identity of mixed race students.

One important contribution of how peer influences impacts college students' environment comes from Thomas. In his study he focused on how peers influence college student socialization (Thomas, 2000). He examined the different effects resulting from students social networks amongst five variables: 1. The number of acquaintances identified by each students. 2. The frequency in which a student was identified by somebody else. 3. The extent to which a student connects with his or her immediate peers. 4. The extent to which a student connects with more highly connected peers. 5. The extent to which a student connects to others outside their grade level (ibid, p. 603-604). Thomas created a map of the peer microsystems and mesosystems for more than 300 students and through his research that the extent to which a student is connected

to other connected students had a small, direct positive impact on student persistence and that student social networks can potentially be viewed as social and academic resources that the students can turn to (ibid, p.607).

In addition, he found that students who had more social ties within their own peer group were slightly less likely to persist even after controlling for all the other variables in his research (ibid, p.607). In other words, the more peer microsystems in which a student associated the more complex his or her mesosystem and the more likely the students would persist. Along the same lines, Bronfenbrenner suggested that the richer and deeper the peer mesosystem, the more likely a student is to attain knowledge, skills and confidence to persist in college (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989, 1993).

Nevertheless, Bronfenbrenner would have expressed some concerns with Thomas's research. From his perspective, he would have been concerned with the individual student's microsystem and mesosystem with respect to how the student's social context changes over time (Chronosystem) in the course of the student's studies at the college. Bronfenbrenner would have made clear that the student's entire collegiate environment- classmates, instructors, college administration, student housing (dormitory or off campus accommodation), the campus layout etc., have a reciprocal impact upon the individual student, while at the same time, the individual student impacts his or her collegiate environment. These reciprocal influences impact the overall individual student's socialization and social networks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Moreover, Bronfenbrenner would question whether or not the relationships between the individual student and his or her peer groups continued beyond the first year of college.

Besides application to education, the ecological model has been applied in the variety of different fields of inquiry. Take for example the study by Johnson that attempts to use the ecological model to categorize various research studies pertaining to neighborhood, school and institutional relationships. In his study Johnson uses the model to determine the depth of the relationships between these entities to evaluate their impact on urban communities. However he slightly uses different terminology for the system of nested relationships to keep his analysis in-line with the relative spread of various environmental influences and community stakeholders, such as school boards, teachers' unions, parents' associations, local governments, etc. (Johnson,

2012). In addition, he uses the model to analyze neighborhood structure as they relate to housing policy and the types of housing that is available to less affluent residents.

With respect to Bronfenbrenner's perspective regarding this research, he might express concern as to where the individual child fits into this application of the model. Meaning, the application focuses on the relationships of different institutions that are relevant to the individual child but do not interact directly with the individual child. In essence, Johnson's adapted model centers around the institutional relationships at the mesosystem, exosystemic and macrosystem levels. Another concern for Bronfenbrenner would be the actual research literature Johnson was categorizing in the first place, because they tended to only focus on the links between larger community institutions, such as school boards, housing authorities, community organizations, local governments, etc., without giving much consideration to how the various relationships affect the individual in the microsystem. At the core, Bronfenbrenner would find this application incomplete because institutions are only effective so long as they do not lose sight of their main purpose. Which, in the context of the ecological model the purpose and the target is developing child. Without taking careful consideration of the microsystem and mesosystem, the outer systems can become redundant.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Bronfenbrenner's ecological development provides a greater insight into child development and it can be also considered as a theory to evaluate analysis and develop the study of psychology of adult learning. In the outcome of the five phases of the theory it can be agreed that the theory focuses on child development within the context of social relationships and environment influences. Each system interacts and influences one another. The theory can be used in variety of fields in order to understand people's notion, desire and figure out better interaction among people by applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory.

The variety of research that has made use of the ecological model shows the immense impression Bronfenbrenner has left on the world. Although there is limited research using the model in adult education, its use in order fields of inquiry demonstrate the possible contributions that could be realized in future adult education research. The model is relevant to adult learning despite its initial intended focus on children. Like children that are growing up and changing physically,

mentally, socially, and spiritually, adults evolve as well in the same aspects yet in different ways. Potential research into adult development would be just as varied and boundless as the research already done about children and teens.

The purpose of this essay is to illuminate what research already done has shown and its potential or existing impacts on future work that is to be done for adult and adult development. The examples highlighted featured certain aspects that are a part of adult learning, though not exclusively. Thomas examined how peer influences impacts college students' environment, and in his study he examined the different effects resulting from students social networks amongst five variables. Thomas clarified that the student's entire collegiate environment- classmates, instructors, college administration, student housing , the campus layout etc., have a reciprocal impact on the individual student, while at the same time, the individual student impacts his or her collegiate environment. On the other hand, Johnson tries to examine the ecological model to categorize different research studies pertaining to neighborhood, school and institutional relationships. Johnson In his study uses the model to determine the relationships between these entities to evaluate their impact on urban communities. He uses the model to analyze neighborhood structure as they relate to housing policy. He slightly uses different terminology for the system of nested relationships to keep his analysis in-line with the relative spread of various environmental influences and community stakeholders, such as school boards, teachers' unions, parents' associations, local governments, etc.

The process of human socialization has been a key to understanding education. Bronfenbrenner highlighted the impact on development of different levels and sizes environments, in the first instance comes social and cultural environments. In the theory distinction is made between the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems and chronosystems. Nevertheless, Bronfenbrenner's work and contributions to humanity live on. Now, as we are his legacy, it is up to each of us to carry on the work he stated, to finish fixing the wrongs and ills in the world so that all people young and old might live in peace and reach their full potential.

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Figures

Figure1. The figure is taken from Penn, H. 2005. *Early childhood education, Issues and controversies*.

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