

Bronfrenbrenner's Legacy

By Karen Pittman, October 2005

Those of you who know me may remember the concentric circles picture I used to flash around (the one that has children and youth in the middle, surrounded by families, then peers and neighbors, then school and community organizations, then health, social services and other institutional offerings, etc.). Or you may have heard me say that, in the end, we have to remember that children don't grow up in programs, they grow up in families and communities.

What you may not know, however, is that those ideas are the vestiges of my formal training as a sociologist and my long time fascination with grand theory and grand theorists — individuals who apply their academic rigor to creating and testing theories about big things like the process of human development or the recreation of social classes.

Urie Bronfrenbrenner was one of those grand theorists. He died on September 25. He was 88. He was a child psychologist and a leading scholar in developmental psychology and child rearing. He brought us the interdisciplinary field of human ecology that pulled the best of what we know from child psychology, family sociology, community anthropology, and economic and political analysis into one big theory. One that says, in short, children don't grow up in a vacuum. They are influenced by who and what surrounds them.

Bronfrenbrenner encouraged us to see development as not simply the maturing of biological, emotional and cognitive systems but as the interplay between the individual and their context. He encouraged us to respect and account for the fact that context can and, indeed, must change over time.

And he taught us to think small and big at the same time: To recognize that a child or adolescent, in any given month or day, actually operates within multiple settings or microsystems (child with parent, child with teacher, youth with friends, youth with employer). To ponder the fact that the mix of those microsystems (what he called the mesosystem) matters and changes over time. To take into account that the people in the child's mesosystem are influenced by broader forces (the exosystem, their extended family, their work environment, their assessment of their neighbors) that influence their choices and ultimately affect their interactions with the child and that all of this is influenced by the big stuff — the economy, public policy, culture and traditions that make up the macrosystem.

I'll be the first to admit that the terms don't stick with you. I had to dig out an old sociology book to make sure I had them right. But the ideas — the ideas are make sense. They make so much sense 25 years after he proposed them that you might wonder why he bothered to come up with fancy names for them.

These ideas have influenced policy. Bronfrenbrenner had a direct hand in the shaping of the federal Head Start program. He convinced the planning committee appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to incorporate family and community engagement into the basic premises of the program. But his fingerprints are found on many child, youth and family policies and will continue to be found long after his death.

Last January, I devoted my column to the ideas of David Weikart, the founder of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, creator of the Perry Preschool Project (whose early enrollees are still showing the benefits of a quality preschool education 40 years later), and pioneer in demonstrating the power of applying active learning theory to create stimulating learning environments for all adolescents. Weikart's ideas, like Bronfrenbrenner's, have spread much farther than his name.

The youth development field, such as it is, has emerged because of the dedication of practitioners who want to define and improve their craft. We have only recently begun to play in the world of referred journals and footnotes. As we do so, however, it is important that we pay respect to our elders. People like Urie Bronfrenbrenner, David Weikart, Gisela Konopka, and Jane Addams who brought us the theories we now take for granted. People who practiced what they preached. We are, indeed, standing on the shoulders of giants. We should know their names and honor their legacies.

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