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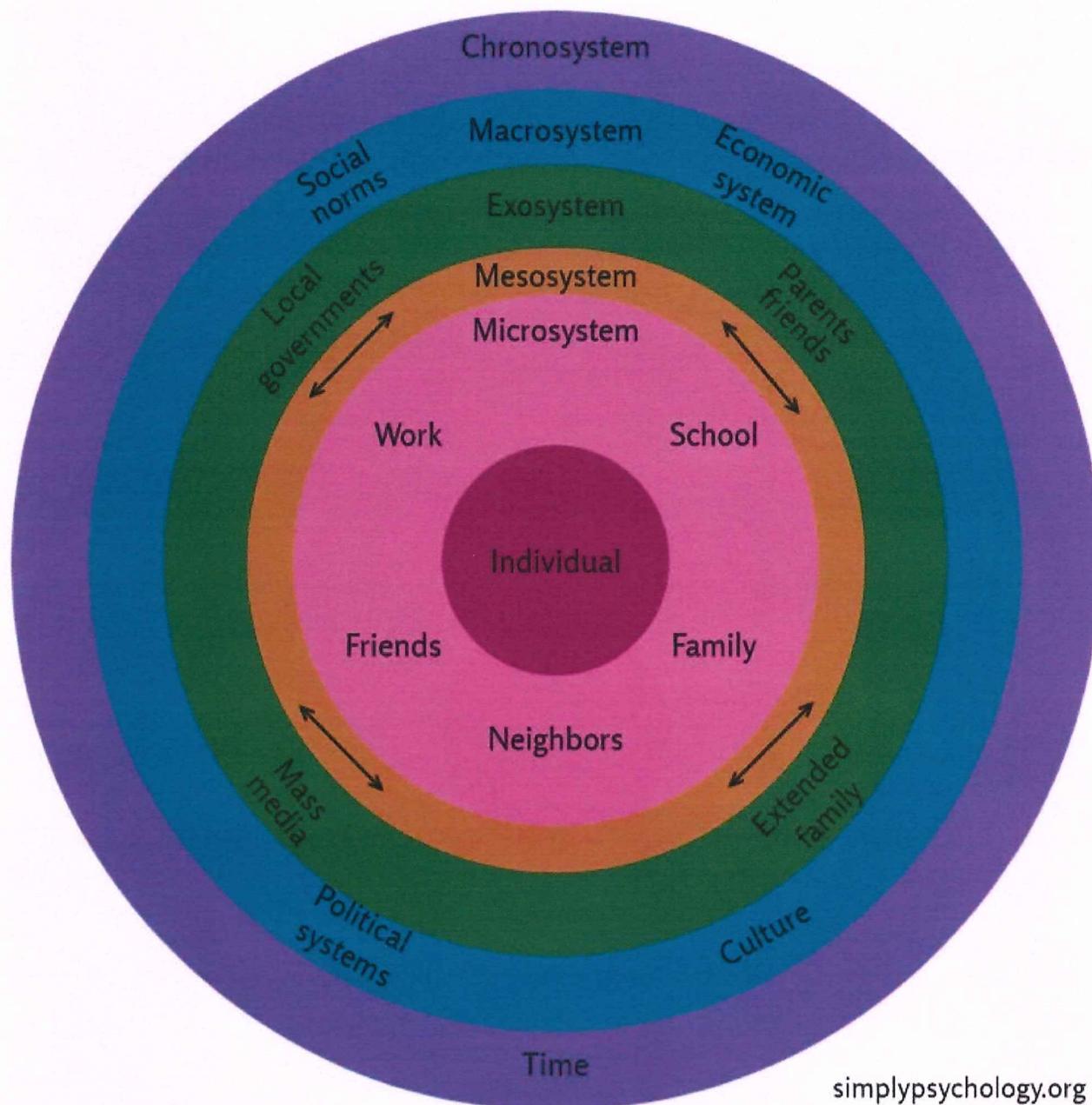
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

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Key Takeaways

- Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory views child development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate settings of family and school to broad cultural values, laws, and customs.
- To study a child's development then, we must look not only at the child and their immediate environment but also at the interaction of the larger environment as well.
- Bronfenbrenner divided the person's environment into five different systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem.
- The microsystem is the most influential level of the ecological systems theory. This is the most immediate environmental setting containing the developing child, such as family and school.
- Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory has implications for educational practice.



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Model – created by Simply Psychology

Table of Contents

1. Background
2. The Five Ecological Systems
3. The Bioecological Model
4. Critical Evaluation
5. Bronfenbrenner's theory in the 21st century
6. Classroom Application
7. Empirical Evidence
8. Frequently Asked Questions



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Background

American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner was critical of previous theories of child development.

He argued that studies of children in unfamiliar laboratory environments with one other person, usually a stranger, were ecologically invalid (See Mary Ainsworth's 1970 experiment of the ' [Strange Situation](#) ').

Bronfenbrenner (1974) claimed most earlier studies were 'unidirectional,' meaning that the laboratory studies observed the influence of A on B (e.g., a stranger/mother with a child) rather than looking at the possible influence of the child on the stranger/mother, or any other third party's influence.

Bronfenbrenner maintained that these [laboratory features of research](#) are not characteristic of environments that children actually live and develop in.

Bronfenbrenner recognized there are multiple aspects of a developing child's life that interacts with and affects the child. His work looked beyond individual development, taking into account wider influencing factors and the context (or ecology) of development.

He proposed the 'Ecological Systems Theory' based on these dynamic interactions that the environments have on the developing child.

Bronfenbrenner's (1974) perspective has some resemblance to the works of [Albert Bandura's social learning theory](#) and [Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory](#) in which the environment is explicitly or

implicitly considered as a crucial mechanism in development.

The Five Ecological Systems

Bronfenbrenner (1977) suggested that the environment of the child is a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next. He organized them in order of how much of an impact they have on a child.

He named these structures the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem.

Because the five systems are interrelated, the influence of one system on a child's development depends on its relationship with the others.

The Microsystem

The microsystem is the first level of Bronfenbrenner's theory and are the things that have direct contact with the child in their immediate environment, such as parents, siblings, teachers, and school peers.

Relationships in a microsystem are bi-directional, meaning the child can be influenced by other people in their environment and is also capable of changing the beliefs and actions of other people too.

Furthermore, the reactions of the child to individuals in their microsystem can influence how they treat them in return.

The interactions within microsystems are often very personal and are crucial for fostering and supporting the child's development.

If a child has a strong nurturing relationship with their parents, this is said to have a positive effect on the child. Whereas distant and unaffectionate parents may have a harmful effect on the child.

The Mesosystem

The mesosystem encompasses the interactions between the child's microsystems, such as the interactions between the child's parents and teachers or between school peers and siblings.

The mesosystem is where a person's individual microsystems do not function independently, but are interconnected and assert influence upon one another.

For instance, if a child's parents communicate with the child's teachers, this interaction may influence the child's development. Essentially, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems.

According to the ecological systems theory, if the child's parents and teachers get along and have a good relationship, this should have positive effects on the child's development, compared to negative effects on development if the teachers and parents do not get along.

The Exosystem

The exosystem is a component of the ecological systems theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s.

It incorporates other formal and informal social structures, which do not themselves contain the child but indirectly influence them as these social structures affect one of the microsystems.

Examples of exosystems include the neighborhood, parents' workplaces, parents' friends, and the mass media. These are environments in which the child is not involved and are external to their experience but nonetheless affect them anyway.

An instance of exosystems affecting the child's development could be if one of the parents had a dispute with their boss at work.

The parent may come home and have a short temper with the child as a result of something which happened in the workplace, which may result in a negative effect on development.

The Macrosystem

The macrosystem is a component of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory that focuses on how cultural elements affect a child's development, such as socioeconomic status, wealth, poverty, and ethnicity.

Thus, the culture that individuals are immersed within may influence their beliefs and perceptions about events that transpire in life.

The macrosystem differs from the previous ecosystems as it does not refer to the specific environments of one developing child, but the already established society and culture in which the child is developing in.

This can also include the socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographic location, and ideologies of the culture.

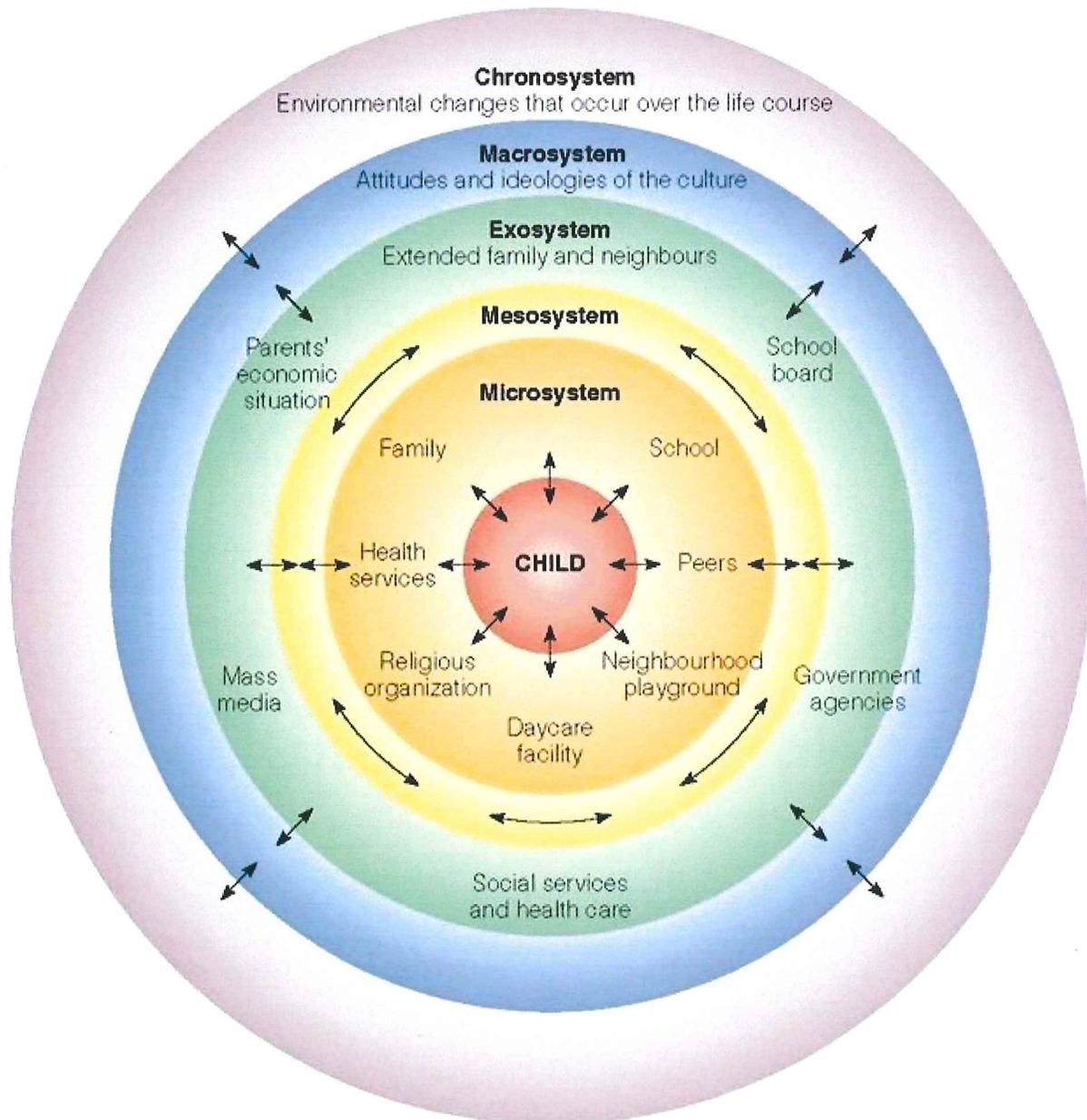
For example, a child living in a third-world country would experience a different development than a child living in a wealthier country.

The Chronosystem

The fifth and final level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is known as the chronosystem.

This system consists of all of the environmental changes that occur over the lifetime which influence development, including major life transitions and historical events.

These can include normal life transitions, such as starting school but can also include non-normative life transitions, such as parents getting a divorce or having to move to a new house.



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model – source: Rhodes, Theories of Child Development, 2013

The Bioecological Model

It is important to note that Bronfenbrenner (1994) later revised his theory and instead named it the 'Bioecological model'.

Bronfenbrenner became more concerned with the proximal processes of development, meaning the enduring and persistent forms of interaction in the immediate environment.

His focus shifted from focusing on environmental influences to developmental processes individuals experience over time.

‘...development takes place through the process of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment.’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Bronfenbrenner also suggested that in order to understand the effect of these proximal processes on development, we have to focus on the person, context, and developmental outcome as these processes vary and affect people differently (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

Critical Evaluation

Bronfenbrenner's model quickly became very appealing and became accepted as a useful framework for psychologists, sociologists, and teachers to study child development.

The Ecological Systems Theory provides a holistic approach that is inclusive of all the systems children and their families are involved in, accurately reflecting the dynamic nature of actual family relationships (Hayes & O'Toole, 2017).

Paat (2013) considers how Bronfenbrenner's theory is useful when it comes to the development of immigrant children. They suggest that immigrant children's experiences in the various ecological systems are likely to be shaped by their cultural differences. An understanding of these children's ecology can aid in strengthening social work service delivery for these children.

A limitation of the Ecological Systems Theory is that there is limited research examining the mesosystems, mainly the interactions between neighborhoods and the family of the child (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Therefore, it is unclear the extent to which these systems can shape child development.

Another limitation of Bronfenbrenner's theory is that it is difficult to empirically test the theory. The studies investigating the ecological systems may establish an effect, but they cannot establish whether the systems are the direct cause of such effects.

Furthermore, this theory can lead to assumptions that those who do not have strong and positive ecological systems lack in development. Whilst this may be true in some cases, many people can still develop into well-rounded individuals without positive influences from their ecological systems.

For instance, it is not true to say that all people who grow up in poverty-stricken areas of the world will develop negatively. Similarly, if a child's teachers and parents do not get along, some children may not experience any negative effects from this if it does not concern them.

As a result, people need to take care not to make broad assumptions about individuals using this theory.

Bronfenbrenner's Theory In The 21st Century

The world has changed a lot since this theory was introduced in terms of technological developments.

The exosystem of a child could be expanded to take into account influences from social media, video gaming, and other modern-day interactions within the ecological system.

This could suggest that the ecological systems are still valid but may expand over time to include new modern developments.

Kelly and Coughlan (2019) used constructivist grounded theory analysis to develop a theoretical framework for youth mental health recovery and found that there were many links to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in [their own more recent theory](#).

Their theory suggested that the components of mental health recovery are embedded in the 'ecological context of influential relationships,' which fits in with Bronfenbrenner's theory that the ecological systems of the young person, such as peers, family, and school, all help mental health development.

Classroom Application

The Ecological Systems Theory has been used to link psychological and educational theory to early educational curriculums and practice. At the center of the theory is the developing child and all that occurs within and between the five ecological systems are done so to benefit the child in the classroom.

- To strengthen the development between the ecological systems in educational practice according to the theory, teachers and parents should maintain good communication with each other and work together to benefit the child.
- Teachers should also be understanding of the situations their student's families may be experiencing, including social and economic factors that are part of the various systems.
- According to the theory, if parents and teachers have a good relationship, this should shape the child's development in a positive way.
- Likewise, the child must also be active in their learning, engaged both academically and socially. They must work as a team with their peers and get involved in meaningful learning experiences to enable positive development (Evans, 2012).

Empirical Evidence

There are lots of studies that have investigated the effects of the school environment on students. Below are some examples:

Lippard, LA Paro, Rouse, and Crosby (2017) conducted a study to test Bronfenbrenner's theory. They investigated the teacher-child relationships through teacher reports and classroom observations.

They found that these relationships were significantly related to children's academic achievement and classroom behavior, suggesting that these relationships are important for children's development and supports the Ecological Systems Theory.

Wilson et al. (2002) found that creating a positive school environment, through a school ethos valuing diversity has a positive effect on students' relationships within the school. Incorporating this kind of school ethos influences those within the developing child's ecological systems.

Langford et al. (2014) found that whole-school approaches to the health curriculum can positively improve educational achievement and student well-being. Thus, the development of the students is being affected by the microsystems.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main contribution of Bronfenbrenner's theory?

The Ecological Systems Theory has contributed to our understanding that there are multiple levels of influence on an individual's development, rather than just individual traits or characteristics.

Bronfenbrenner contributed to the understanding that parent-child relationships do not occur in a vacuum, but are embedded in larger structures.

Ultimately, this theory has contributed to a more holistic understanding of human development, and has influenced fields such as psychology, sociology, and education.

What could happen if a child's microsystem breaks down?

If a child experiences conflict or neglect within their family, or bullying or rejection by their peers, their microsystem may break down. This can lead to a range of negative outcomes, such as decreased academic achievement, social isolation, and mental health issues.

Additionally, if the microsystem is not providing the necessary support and resources for the child's development, it can hinder their ability to thrive and reach their full potential.

How can the Ecological System's Theory explain peer pressure?

The ecological systems theory explains peer pressure as a result of the microsystem (immediate environment) and mesosystem (connections between environments) levels.

Peers provide a sense of belonging and validation in the microsystem, and when they engage in certain behaviors or hold certain beliefs, they may exert pressure on the child to conform. The mesosystem can also influence peer pressure, as conflicting messages and expectations from different environments can create pressure to conform.

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