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Bronfenbrenner in context and in motion

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Urie Bronfenbrenner and the Ecology of Human Development

Matthias Grundmann

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Bronfenbrenner in Context and in Motion²

Bronfenbrenner – Forschung und Entwicklung im Kontext

Urie Bronfenbrenner's contributions to the understanding of human development span the multilayered contexts he himself identified. He succeeded in reframing the study of development, from an exclusive focus on the decontextualized individual to viewing developing persons in dynamic transaction with the multiple, nested layers of the (changing) environments in which they are embedded. He has been equally influential in moving scholarship in the social sciences beyond the false dichotomy differentiating "basic" from "applied" research, as well as the artificial divides between science and social policy. Urie's greatest contribution is this: He transformed the way all of us – scholars, parents, teachers, policy makers – study, conceptualize, write about, and seek to enhance human development. His theories and concepts have been usefully employed by scholars located within and/or working across a wide range of societal, disciplinary, substantive, and age-graded boundaries.

Keywords: ecology, life course, social policy, integrative, development

Urie Bronfenbrenners Beitrag die menschliche Entwicklung zu verstehen, umfasst den mehrschichtigen Kontext, der durch ihn selbst gekennzeichnet wurde. Es gelang ihm die Untersuchung der Entwicklung von einem außergewöhnlichen Blickwinkel aus neu zu entwerfen: die Analyse die sich entwickelnder Personen in ihrer dynamischen Beziehung mit den vielfältigen ineinander geschachtelten (und sich verändernden) Umgebungen, in denen sie eingebunden sind. Er hat ebenso maßgeblich dazu beigetragen, die Wissenschaftsgemeinschaft in den Sozialwissenschaften dahingehend zu beeinflussen, die falsche Dichotomie von „einfacher“ und „angewandter“ Forschung zu überwinden, genauso wie die künstliche Trennung zwischen Wissenschaft und Sozialpolitik. Uries größter Beitrag ist, dass er die Denkweise von uns allen – Wissenschaftlern, Eltern, Lehrern und Verantwortlichen in der Politik – veränderte, die Art und Weise wie die menschliche Entwicklung zu untersuchen, begrifflich gedacht, darüber zu schreiben und zu verbessern sei. Seine Theorien und Konzepte wurden von Wissenschaftlern nutzbringend angewendet, die sowohl innerhalb ihrer Grenzen als auch über diese gesellschaftlichen, disziplinären, substanziellen und altersgestuften Grenzen hinaus arbeiten.

Schlüsselwörter: Ökologie, Lebenslauf, Sozialpolitik, integrativ, Entwicklung

1 Phyllis Moen holds the McKnight Presidential Chair of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, having moved there in 2003. Prior to that, Dr. Moen spent 25 years at Cornell University, where she founded and directed the *Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center* as well as serving as the Ferris Family Professor of Life Course Studies, as well as professor of Human Development and of Sociology. Her most recent books are *The Career Mystique: Cracks in the American Dream* (with Pat Roehling, 2005) and *It's About Time: Couples and Careers* (2003). She was honored to have Urie as a colleague, collaborator, mentor and best friend.

2 Thanks to Ellen Childs for her bibliographic work on references for this article.

1. Introduction

What is the signal intellectual contribution of Urie Bronfenbrenner to the study of human beings? The answer is at once both simple and complex (something he would approve of), and occurs at multiple levels, within a range of contexts. Moreover (and he would like this as well), his scientific impacts are continuing to develop and change over time. Thus the thrust of this special edition on his contributions is of necessity only a snapshot of a dynamic, ongoing process. As such, the “voice” of this article is in the present tense, to remind the reader that Urie’s scholarship continues to be in motion, influencing various cohorts (including those now emerging from or entering graduate school) of developmental scientists as well as policy makers, practitioners, and researchers in a wide variety of disciplinary and substantive fields. I focus principally on the American context, given that Cornell University, American psychology, and American social policies often constituted key reference points in the ecology of his own intellectual development. But Urie was truly border spanning, drawing on ideas and evidence across cultures, nations, history, and disciplines – to discover, illustrate, and advance the scientific understanding of human development.

In order to capture something of the multiple layers of Bronfenbrenner’s contribution, I begin with his impact on the taken-for-granted beliefs and framings of research and theory on human development: scholars’ ways of thinking about what should be studied and how studies should be designed. These constitute what Urie terms the *macrosystem*, overarching patterns of ideology, along with the structure and culture of social reality. His message to the scholarly community is that these beliefs and structural arrangements are not simply “out there”. They also permeate the institutions, language and methods of scientific research.

2. Contributions at the Macro-level

Social and behavioral scientists, like physicists and chemists, are concerned with patterns. They investigate and seek to understand identifiable configurations – of human activity, roles, and abilities as well as social relationships, resources, risks, resilience – what these configurations look like, what causes them, and what are their consequences. But the patterns they examine often come already *prepackaged* in the form of existing schema (mental maps) and institutional arrangements: habitual ways of thinking about and organizing such things as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, parenthood, neighborhood, schools, peer groups, employment, and old age. Scholars, like the rest of society, hold unexamined beliefs about the very subject matter they investigate (see also Luescher, 1995). Thus, scholars of human development have in their heads, for example, appropriate topics to study, convictions about what constitutes optimal development, and blueprints of how it should be studied, along with a collection of preconceived notions about, for example, parenting, children, physical, cognitive and emotional processes, social class, gender, race and ethnicity, schooling, social policies, and families.

2.1 A Paradigm Shift in the Theoretical Unit of Analysis

Urie’s greatest contribution is this: *He transformed the way all of us – scholars, parents, teachers, policy makers – study, conceptualize, write about, and*

seek to enhance human development. Bronfenbrenner single-handedly (though he would list a host of others) refuted existing schema about the nature and the study of human beings. He characterizes the prevailing (in the 1970s) scientific model of research on human development as “critically impoverished – both theoretically and empirically” (1977, p. 336). But not only (or mainly) an iconoclast, Bronfenbrenner also offers useful vantage points from which to *reframe* theory development, research, policy, and practice. What is key, from his perspective, is that the subject and study of lives should emphasize the *dynamic, bidirectional links* between person and environment. This requires a shift in the unit of analysis, from the developing person (or, for sociologists, from characteristics of the environment) to the ongoing, life-long *interplay* between individuals and the contexts of their lives.

Bronfenbrenner encourages scholars, experts, and policy-makers (as well as citizens and family members) to closely examine previously taken-for-granted mental maps and scientific protocols. He challenges the use of structural models, for example, saying that in conventional causal analysis: “developmental sequences are implicitly conceptualized and explicitly analyzed as if they were invariant across both person and situation.” No matter how many pathways are taken, “they are seen as proceeding at the same pace to the same place, irrespective of who they are, whence they came, or the nature of the terrain they may be traversing” (1977, p. 43).

Bronfenbrenner’s insights have changed the theoretical unit of scientific analysis from the individual to the individual-in-proximal processes, that is, embedded in and interacting with relational, historical, organizational, and policy contexts. He also broadened the focus from *child* to *human* development, recognizing that development consists of life-long processes, and is not the exclusive province of infants, children, and youth. In his pathbreaking (1977) *American Psychologist* paper, he proposed a research approach that “focuses on the progressive accommodation, throughout the life span, between the growing human organism and the changing environments in which it actually lives and grows” (p. 513).

In shifting scientific inquiry from a focus on either the person or the environment to the study of both in dynamic transaction, Bronfenbrenner challenged conventional research designs, encouraging scholars to move from laboratory experiments to studies locating the developing person in a series of nested and multilayered *ecologies*. His theoretical reframing transformed research questions from an emphasis on *outcomes* to the *processes* in which the developing person and her social environment (especially those important to her) mutually influence one another. This focus on process reflects Bronfenbrenner’s theorizing of development as occurring in *time* as well as in *space*.

If all of these insights seem obvious, than you too have benefited from Bronfenbrenner’s deft cartography, his redrawing the mental maps of human development in order to better capture the experiences of persons in space and in time, in dynamic transaction with the nested, shifting environments in which their lives play out.

2.2 Refocusing the Subject, Methods, and Implications of Inquiry

An important though obscure truism, known as the [Kenneth] Burke theorem is “A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing – a focus upon object A involves

a neglect of object B" (Burke, 1935, p. 70). The taken-for-granted frames with which societies as well as scholars categorize people and phenomena invariably influence how research topics and social issues are defined. Sometimes mental maps take the shape of metaphors and myths: vivid, shorthand ways of making sense of the world that spill over from defining the ways things *are* to prescribing the ways things *should be*. Categorizing, labeling, mythmaking and metaphors are all essential for social cognition, for development, and for cultural transmission. But there are drawbacks, when the cultural myths and metaphors, the defining of A and the ignoring of B, are taken for the (only) reality, providing the only guide to action.

The neglected "B" from Bronfenbrenner's vantage point in 1979 was the ecological contexts of human development. His famous synopsis of this neglect: "Much of contemporary developmental psychology is the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time."

Mental maps become a form of cultural DNA, part of the collective understanding of the world and its possibilities. Even though they are socially constructed (made up at some point in history), they become extremely consequential for societies, families, and individual lives. What Bronfenbrenner understood is that mental maps frame the thinking of everyone, including scholars, public intellectuals and public officials who draw on what are often false maps to define both social problems and their social solutions. Moreover, these mental maps are extremely difficult to change. As Meyer and Rowan (1977, p. 341) describe it, expectations, assumptions, and ways of seeing the world become institutionalized when "social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action".

Urie Bronfenbrenner's interdisciplinary theory of the bioecology of human development has had multilayered impacts on scholarship in the social, behavioral, legal, environmental, ecological, and health sciences. Robert and Beverly Cairns (1995) conclude that "Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the role of social ecology has helped change the face of modern science" (p. 398). His influence transcends narrow disciplinary boundaries, ages or stages of development, or particular outcomes.

Urie advocated for close observation and analysis of development in the context of the system of multilayered ecologies in which the developing person is located. That more developmentalists now investigate individuals in natural settings, in the multiple environments touching individual lives, is one of his signal accomplishments.

Equally influential has been Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on lives lived in real time and real places, not laboratories, from which follows the weight he placed on studying the impacts of social policies (or absence thereof) in shaping development, and the possibility for social innovations in policies and practices that can promote optimal psychological growth.

3. The Importance of Exosystems

Especially revolutionary in his reframing is Urie's emphasis on *exosystems*, defined as "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as

an active participant, but in which events occur that affect or are affected by what happens in the setting containing the developing person.” In other words, organizational arrangements in which persons of interest don’t directly participate, but arrangements that nevertheless are extremely consequential for the course of their development. Sociologists like myself don’t always use the “exosystem” term, but we do employ the concept behind it, which we see as underscoring the significance of “mediating institutions” (see also Luckmann & Berger, 1964). What is key is that such social arrangements constitute essential links between individuals and families on the one hand, and macro-level cultural and institutional constraints and challenges on the other.

3.1 The Primacy of Paid Work

A prime example of an ecosystem is the “long arm” of the job, especially in terms of its impacts on children. Bronfenbrenner frequently makes the point that children in developed societies know very little about the world of paid work, learning about jobs only indirectly, and mostly from the media rather than from direct observation. They may never even (or seldom) go to work with their moms or dads. Bronfenbrenner’s theorizing encourages scholarship on the ways their parents’ jobs shape children’s opportunities, resources, and risks, and especially their interactions with their parents, as well as parenting styles, home environments, and degree of stress, routine, and chaos they are exposed to (Kohn, 1969; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

Examples of his impact are evident in the recently published multidisciplinary edited volume by Urie’s former student, Ann (Nan) Crouter and Alan Booth (2004), *Work-Family Challenges for Low-Income Parents and Their Children*. For instance, Maureen Perry-Jenkins (2004) draws on his ecological perspective on the distinctiveness of family processes within and across contexts in her chapter describing an in-depth study of working-class couples and shift work. Hawkins and Whiteman (2004) illustrate Urie’s ideas in their chapter, describing how both, personal characteristics and social contexts should frame the research agenda on low-wage work and its impacts on families.

Urie’s intellectual imprint is also evident in the just published (2006) multidisciplinary *Work and Family Handbook*, edited by Marcie Pitt Catsouphe, Ellen Ernst Kossek, and Steven Sweet – all trained in different disciplines: social work, organizational psychology, and sociology, and yet all influenced by Bronfenbrenner’s ideas. In their chapter in this handbook, Marcie Pitt-Catsouphe and Jennifer Swanberg (2006) demonstrate the usefulness of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model in social work research on work and family issues. Shelley MacDermid and Ashley Harvey (2006) draw on Urie’s model (Bronfenbrenner, Moen & Garbarino, 1984) to theorize about multi-level units and impacts, while Ray Swisher (2006) demonstrates the value of such multi-level, hierarchical analysis.

3.2 The Primacy of Public Policy

One of Urie’s aphorisms is: “Basic science needs public policy even more than public policy needs basic science.” With elements situated in both the macro-system and the exosystem, social policies operate as a hidden hand shaping the

proximal processes of human development. Hence Urie's call for a reframing of science and public policy to acknowledge the relationship between them.

His Harvard mentor, Walter Fenno Dearborn, used to say, "Bronfenbrenner, if you want to understand something, try to change it" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 606). Urie maintained that a key reason that the science of human development needs to think about and incorporate policy is the opportunity to view the impacts of policy change. He endorsed the use of "natural experiments" to trace out the multiple, interacting, nested influences of changes in the macro-system (social policies changes and changing cultural climates) or in the exosystem (organizational and community policies) as they open up or constrain the environments and processes of human development.

4. A Double Focus: Proximal Processes in Context and Motion

A signal contribution has been Bronfenbrenner's acknowledgement of the impacts of distal ecologies, the larger layers of society, policies, institutions, and organizations, on individual development. But this is only half the story. His point is that scholars of human development require at a minimum *double vision*, recognizing the progressive accommodation between a growing human organism and its immediate environment, *and* the ways in which this dynamic relationship is shaped by larger macro-level, external forces (the economy, policy regimes, the labor market, for example). He labels this process one of *mutual accommodation*: the person is changing, the immediate (proximal) social environment is changing, and the larger contexts in which they are embedded are also changing.

Given his double focus, Bronfenbrenner's mapping of the ecology of human development emphasizes the importance of ongoing interconnections (microsystems) in the form of activities, roles and relationships between the developing person in a face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features, as well as the multiple contexts (mesosystems) in which the developing person actively participates.

Over time, Bronfenbrenner began to warn that the pendulum was swinging too far toward a focus on the multilayered ecologies in which development take place, losing sight of the developing individual. The focus on "B" in terms of the Burke (1935) theorem, the spotlight on the environment (which he himself precipitated with his 1977 and 1979 publications), was beginning to be exclusive of "A," the developing person. He termed this growing scientific interest as the study of "context without development" (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Bronfenbrenner responded to scholars' heightened emphasis on contexts but not development itself by undertaking considerable reworking of his theoretical model, further differentiating both person and environment (1992, reprinted in 2005). In an influential chapter published just four years after *Ecology of Human Development*, Bronfenbrenner and one of his distinguished former students, Anne (Nan) Crouter, (1983) criticize research designs following a *social address* model (pp. 361-362). By this they mean the locating of individual outcomes in particular social or spatial niches (such as gender, race and ethnicity, social class, region, locale), but not explaining the *processes* by which these characteristics matter for the lives of developing individuals. Such "social

address" labels do little to define "what the environment is like, what people are living there, what they are doing, or how the activities taking place could affect the child" (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983, pp. 382-389).

Moreover, people may well choose or modify their "addresses." This point is underscored in the research and writing of Michael Rutter and colleagues (1995), who reinforce the need to understand "the ways in which individuals act to shape and select the environments that, in turn, impinge and influence their own later behavior" (p. 89), in other words, the proximal processes of the interplay between individuals and their environments. Eleanor Maccoby (1995, pp. 347-348) invokes a similar argument about the bidirectionality between environments and individuals: "Effective contexts change with development, not only because individuals at different stages take different things from the same environment, but because they create and select different social networks by which they are then affected."

All these insights circle back to Urie's concern about those studying development "controlling for context" or else studying context but not the developing process (e.g. see Steinberg, Darling & Fletcher, 1995).

4.1 The Developing Person in Context over the Life Course

Urie's incorporation of the life course paradigm in the 1980s proved a signal modification of the ecological model and an important advance in its interdisciplinary reach. He drew heavily on the work of Glen Elder (1974, 1985, 1999), introducing the *chronosystem* and *PPCT models* (Person, Process, Context, Time), studies focusing on life events, experiences, and transitions over the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Further theoretical extension and revision culminated in a major piece in Vasta's *Six Theories of Child development* (1992). In it, Bronfenbrenner both reaffirms and strengthens his *ecological systems theory* (1992). Contributions from this phase of Urie's theory development include the further illumination of life course processes as they unfold in particular ecologies. He modified his definition of human development to incorporate temporal dimensions, "*the phenomenon of constancy and change in the characteristics of the person over the life course*" (1992, p. 189), or, more formally, "*the set of processes through which properties of the person and the environment interact to produce constancy and change in the biopsychological characteristics of the person over the life course*" (1992, p. 189).

Bronfenbrenner's alteration of his ecological systems theory fit well with the temporal and contextual principles and foci of life course analysis. An example is the life course notion of *agency*: people not only develop within nested contexts, but they *alter* them, what Urie describes as a "person's evolving conception of ecological environment and his or her relation to it, as well as growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties." He also modified his definition of microsystems to include more about the immediate, face-to-face setting, noting that it also contains "other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief" (2005 [1992], p. 148).

Bronfenbrenner further adjusted his theorization of the role of the macrosystem as containing a "cultural repertoire of belief systems" (2005 [1992], p.

149), broadening the definition of the macrosystem as the “overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems’ characteristic of a given culture, sub-culture, or other broader social context, *with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options; and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in each of these systems*” (2005 [1992], pp. 149-150).

An example of Urie’s indirect but boundary spanning influence is evident in the research and thinking of life course scholars on a wide range of topics (e.g. Alwin, 1995; Axinn & Barber, 2001; Clausen, 1995; Dornbusch, 1989; Elder & Shanahan, 2006; Kohn, 1995; Lareau, 2002; Moen & Roehling, 2005; Moen 2003; Wheaton & Clarke, 2003; Wilson, 1995; Yabiku, Axinn & Thornton, 1999). Exemplary of the reach of Bronfenbrenner’s ideas is a collaboration between life course scholars, developmentalists and social historians that resulted in the volume *Children in Time and Place* (1993), edited by Glen H. Elder, Jr., John Modell, and Ross D. Parke.

4.2 Community, Neighborhood, and Family

Bronfenbrenner has showcased families as the locus of key relationships, especially between parents and children, but also as a mediating institution between the developing person and the larger cultural and structural forces of society. His 1970 book, *Two Worlds of Childhood*, encouraged a cross-national comparative focus on families and parenting styles. In chapters on the “Future of Childhood” (1985), “Strengthening Family Systems” (1988), and “Child Care in the Anglo-Saxon Mode” (1992), Bronfenbrenner offered evidence of the vulnerability of contemporary families, and the developmental (of both parents and children) implications of the pressures they face, the paucity of neighborhood and community supports to families and children, and the absence of social policies that might strengthen their effectiveness and life quality.

The plight of contemporary families became the nexus in which Urie most frequently examines the absence of interface between science and policy. He and Heather Weiss (1983) offer an ecological perspective on child and family policy. Translating research evidence into implications for policy and practice precipitated a coauthored collaboration between colleagues and students, resulting in a book (*The State of Americans*) depicting trends showing the breakdown in forces promoting optimal human development (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1996).

Bronfenbrenner, Moen and Garbarino (1984) located families in the context of neighborhood and community, even as Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1982) located working families in time and space. Ecological systems theory continues to be influential in shaping studies of neighborhood and community, in, for example the work by Brooks-Gunn and colleagues (1994, 1997) and that by Margaret Beale Spencer (2001 – see also Booth & Crouter, 2001). Connell and Kubisch (2001) use ecological concepts to illustrate that in the U.S., policies aimed at “fixing” communities have been a strategy for promoting well-being.

William Julius Wilson (1995) draws on ecological systems theory to point out that children can be adversely affected by family integration into disadvantaged neighborhoods. Jackie Goodnow (1995) encourages a similar nuanced under-

standing of the conceptual possibilities of Bronfenbrenner's notion of contexts – as varying in the degree of interaction and participation and hence degree of access, varying in the specification of rights and obligations, and varying in the degree of substitutability of one part of a system for another.

Several of Bronfenbrenner's former students draw on ecological systems theory to develop research programs that locate children, youth and families in neighborhood and community contexts that enhance access (Small & Eastman, 1991; Small & Supple, 2001), to consider the role of evolutionary forces (Belsky, 1995), and to refocus on the processes of development, not simply the contexts in which it takes place (Bolger, Caspi, Downey & Moorehouse, 1988).

4.3 *Nature and Nurture – and Methods – Revisited*

Urie Bronfenbrenner and Steve Ceci (1993, 1994) have made important contributions in the further development and elaboration of what became reframed as the *bioecological* model of human development. In doing so, they draw on ideas and evidence in the biological, behavioral and social sciences – from behavioral genetics to history and economics. This has been a fruitful collaboration to rethink and update issues and insights around the heredity-environment interface (see also Ceci, 1996; Bronfenbrenner, 1995a, 1995b).

In this formulation, the developing person has become “an active evolving biopsychological human organism”, and the environment is further amplified as “persons, objects, and symbols” (2001, p. 6965). Both person and environment are joined through “proximal processes”, that is, enduring forms of interaction taking place in the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 2001[both reprinted in Bronfenbrenner, 2005]). Ceci and Hembrooke (1995) develop a model depicting the “bioecological trajectory through which genes are transformed into intellectual phenotypes” (p. 336).

Bronfenbrenner (2001, reprinted in 2005) emphasizes the importance of *experience*, that is, the subjective understandings, beliefs, and anticipations of the developing person. Experiences evince properties of both, stability and change. The double focus on the person in proximal environments and on more distal forces extends to also incorporate both objective and subjective aspects of relationships and the proximal environment, as well as the relationship between objective and subjective components.

A signal theoretical and methodological contribution is Bronfenbrenner's focus on the *system* of contexts and processes, on *people* not *variables* – as individuals, as dyads, and as social networks and groups in dynamic interaction with the multilayered ecologies of their lives. Looking for patterns in process and context has characterized Bronfenbrenner's agenda since his early (1958) analysis of socialization and social class through time and space. But this double focus requires new research designs and analytic procedures. Robert and Beverley Cairns (1995, pp. 416-417) conclude that, “A new synthesis on genetic-physiological-social development integration is in the making,” but that developmental investigators are “straightjacketed by measurement conventions and statistical procedures that are alien to the phenomena that they aspire to study”.

Bronfenbrenner joined with colleagues to warn of the “progressive fragmentation of our field” and the researches “looking more and more at less and less (Bron-

fenbrenner, Kessel, Kessen, & White, 1986, p. 1219). Magnusson (1995) suggests that real scientific progress requires scholars to “plan, implement, and interpret the empirical research with reference to a holistic, integrated model for individual functioning and development” (p. 51). But such an approach is difficult to implement. As the Cairns’ (1995) point out, “An integrative approach is even more important for social development than for cognitive development, to understand the interdependence of events within and without the individual” (p. 420).

5. Interpersonal Contributions to Science and Society

Urie often invoked his father’s wisdom, as in the saying, “you are the people in your lives”. He introduced the people in his life to one another, across time and space. How many of us now know (or know better) Vygotsky (1978), Lewin (1931, 1948), Dearborn (1928), Ogden and Freeman (1932), Mead (1934) – because of those (re)introductions in Bronfenbrenner’s writings? How many of us feel we too have benefited from the wisdom of Urie’s father and Urie’s wife Liese, because of his wonderful stories? In classrooms and in conversations he regularly supplemented findings from science with a different kind of evidence from great poets, essayists, and writers of fiction, as well as from the people shaping his own, on-going, development.

Similar introductions have been made across disciplinary boundaries. His students, colleagues and collaborators have all profited from the breadth as well as the depth of his interests and analysis. Bronfenbrenner characteristically ignored disciplinary, substantive, and bureaucratic pigeon-holes in life as in his scholarship. In doing so, he has become a powerful model of the “new” Renaissance man (or person), equally at ease being a pragmatist as well as theorist, a humanist as well as scientist.

Urie himself participated in multiple ecologies. A key force in the invention and enactment of Head Start, he was especially eager to straddle divisions between science, policy and practice: speaking to Boy Scout groups and Head Start parents as well as congressional subcommittees; spending hours with a single student as well as teaching classes so large they had to set up monitors in different rooms. He was simultaneously a mentor and friend to people of all ages and stages and a world-renowned scientist, as popular in Western and Eastern Europe and Japan as in the U.S.

Urie Bronfenbrenner continues to fire the imagination of those who come under the influence of his ideas. Through the wealth of his writings, communities of scholars and citizens move with him down the primrose path of inquiry, seeing first through his eyes and then our own not so much the problems but the possibilities – for challenging and reframing both, scholarship and social policies, for identifying, nurturing, and creating sustainable and sustaining ecologies and proximal processes most conducive to optimal human development.

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