

Chapter 13

The Ecological Model of Human Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter delves into “The Ecological Model of Human Development,” an influential framework formulated by Urie Bronfenbrenner, which posits that human development is shaped by the interplay of multiple environmental systems. Geared towards educators and practitioners in adult learning, the chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the five core systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. By examining these interconnected layers, the chapter elucidates how various factors—from immediate familial and social interactions to broader societal and cultural influences—affect the developmental trajectories of adult learners. The chapter also traces the evolution of Bronfenbrenner's theory through three distinct phases, transitioning from an ecological to a bioecological framework (from 1970s to 2000s). The chapter argues for a holistic approach to adult learning, one that recognizes the complexity of human development and the importance of creating supportive, adaptive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

“We are the only species that, over historical time, has developed the capacity to engage successfully in scientific inquiry, and thereby, in many respects, has been able to change the nature of the world in which we live. As a result, within certain

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limits, we humans have altered the nature and course of our own development as a species” (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

A hungry cat will easily learn to follow the sound of the rustling food packet, but such sounds simply do not interest rats. Rats can learn to navigate mazes to find rewards. They use spatial cues to remember the correct path through the maze. Young birds, like canaries, learn to sing by trial and error. They produce various sounds and receive feedback from their environment until they mimic the desired song. However, for swallow chicks, parents protect and guide their young as they learn to fly. The fledglings that succeed in flying follow their parents and learn skills such as navigation and hunting during flight. These examples highlight the diverse ways animals learn and adapt to their environments, each through unique mechanisms.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, also known as the 'Ecological Theory' is mostly known as the work of James Gibson and Urie Bronfenbrenner (Tudge et al., 1996), provides a framework for understanding these processes. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is one of the most commonly used theoretical models for examining individuals in ecological settings (Neal & Neal, 2013). The Ecological Theory bears similarities to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Lev Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory. To better understand the unique strengths and limitations of Bronfenbrenner's model, it's helpful to compare it to other well-known developmental theories, like Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. This comparison can shed light on what makes each theory distinct and how they complement or contrast with each other in explaining human development.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory focuses on the role of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in development. It posits that individuals learn behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions through observing others, particularly role models (Bandura, 1977). Unlike Bronfenbrenner's model, Bandura's theory incorporates cognitive factors, acknowledging that internal processes are crucial in learning and development. While it acknowledges the importance of the environment, it does not provide a detailed framework for understanding the broader ecological contexts influencing development. The theory tends to overlook the role of biological and genetic factors in development, focusing primarily on environmental and cognitive influences.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development. It introduces the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory highlights the essential role of social interaction and cultural tools in cognitive development, emphasizing that learning is a socially mediated process. The concept of the ZPD has been instrumental in educational

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