

# This Week's Citation Classic

**Bronfenbrenner U.** Toward an experimental ecology of human development.

*Amer. Psychol.* 32:513-31, 1977.

[Cornell University, Ithaca, NY]

The proposed theoretical perspective emphasizes using rigorously designed naturalistic and planned experiments for studying development in the actual environments, both immediate and more remote, in which people live. The evolving reciprocal relation between person and environment through life is conceptualized and operationalized in systems terms. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*<sup>®</sup> (SSCI)<sup>®</sup> indicates that this paper has been cited in over 175 publications since 1977.]

Urie Bronfenbrenner

Department of Human Development  
and Family Studies  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY 14853

April 28, 1983

"The ideas presented in this article have their origins in both manifest and latent content. In the former sphere, I am most indebted to my first teacher in psychology, Frank S. Freeman (who taught, as I do now, at Cornell University). Freeman's course and text, *Individual Differences*,<sup>1</sup> presented an interactionist view that was decades ahead of its time, and perhaps still of ours.

"It was also Freeman who enrolled me in a one-student course in which he assigned several works then quite alien to the psychology curriculum, including the three chapters by Lewin, Piaget, and Freud published in the first *A Handbook of Child Psychology*.<sup>2</sup> In the fourth edition of this same handbook, Ann Crouter and I<sup>3</sup> show that the complex multilevel conceptions of organism-environment interaction I set forth in the original article, and the volume that followed,<sup>4</sup> stem from the revolutionary ideas of these paradigm makers, and the subsequent transformations of their ideas in empirical work. The designation of my 1977 article as a *Citation Classic* pays honor to these paradigm makers and their equally creative interpreters. For what I did was to synthesize the emerging paradigms, both explicit and implicit, into a larger whole—a system of systems within systems, like a set of nested Russian dolls.

"In my work I have tried to show that research based on such more differentiated

conceptions reveals the hitherto unrecognized power of environments to shape the course of human growth and—paradoxically—the power of human beings to adapt to, modify, and create the very environments that shape their development.

"This orientation also has roots in personal experiences: emigrating from Russia as a child, I entered school not knowing a word of English. My classmates—mostly Irish, Italians, and blacks from poor families living in a neighborhood integrated by poverty—initiated me into the world of American childhood, quite different from that of my family. The effort to integrate these 'two worlds of childhood'<sup>5</sup> is not difficult to detect in my research, teaching, and theory building. The effort was given new direction when a year later we moved to rural upstate New York to live on the grounds of a state institution for the then called 'feebleminded,' where my father was a neuropathologist. A superb diagnostician, he also had a PhD in zoology, and was a field naturalist at heart. The institution and its setting offered a rich biological and social terrain for his observant eye.

"It was in this third world of my childhood that my father took me on innumerable walks, through the wards, shops, and farmland—where he preferred to see and talk with his patients—and then beyond the barbed wire fence into the woods and hills that began at our doorstep. Wherever we went, he would point to the functional interdependence between living organisms and their surroundings.

"These early experiences may provide a key to an understanding of the nature and origin of the research paradigms developed and described in my recent work. These experiences may also explain why the paradigms are now being cited and applied in contemporary research. As investigators move beyond the laboratory and the testing room into the sequence of varied multiple settings that actually shape our lives, we need theoretical frameworks that permit the systematic analysis of these settings and their interrelations. It is gratifying to know that my effort to provide such a framework is proving useful to my colleagues."

1. Freeman F S. *Individual differences: the nature and causes of variations in intelligence and special abilities*. New York: H. Holt, 1934. 355 p.
2. Marchion C, ed. *A handbook of child psychology*. Worcester, MA: Clark University Press, 1931. 711 p.
3. Bronfenbrenner U & Crouter A. The evolution of environmental models in developmental research. (Mussen P H, ed.) *A handbook of child psychology*. New York: Wiley, 1983.
4. Bronfenbrenner U. *The ecology of human development: experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979. 330 p.
5. ...., *Two worlds of childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970. 190 p.