

Urie Bronfenbrenner

April 29, 1917 — September 25, 2005

Urie Bronfenbrenner, the Jacob Gould Sherman Professor of Human Development and of Psychology, died in Ithaca at the age of 88, after more than 50 years on the Cornell faculty. He was a world-renowned scholar whose lectures filled Bailey Hall to overflowing and inspired generations of students. His graduate students are now on the faculties of colleges and universities around the country and abroad. He was so generous with his nurturing that many influential scholars who never studied directly with him also considered him their mentor.

Born in Moscow in 1917, Urie came to the United States at age six. As the child of immigrant parents, he became the interpreter of the new culture for his parents and always retained an immigrant's dual perspective, living in one culture but rooted in another. In the polyglot Pittsburgh neighborhood where he first lived, he learned how to play fair in baseball, a lesson he came to see as fundamental to being American. This experience led him to view the peer group as a complement to the family in the socialization of children, a view that motivated some of his earliest research and led him to reject the assumption implicit in much research and policy that the family has a separate and isolated effect on children.

He grew up near Letchworth Village, New York, a residential institution for people then known as "feeble minded," where his father served as clinical pathologist and research director. His mother nurtured his love of music and literature, and Russian literature, which always influenced his thinking about people in society and gave voice to his love of nature. He learned about ecology in the natural world from his father, a physician who also had a degree in zoology. In long walks around the grounds of the institution, his father would ask why the same plant looked so different in two different locations and then point to such factors as moisture, shade, wind, and soil type to illustrate the complex interdependencies between an organism and its physical environment. Young Urie had daily contact with residents of the village who had been labeled "feeble minded" but who nonetheless made valued contributions to their small community. He noticed that many became markedly more competent when given both the opportunity to contribute and the support they needed to do so. These early experiences helped to shape his subsequent professional interests.

Urie received his A.B. degree from Cornell in 1938 with a double major in Psychology and in Music. He then earned an M.A. degree from Harvard and his Ph.D. degree in Developmental Psychology from Michigan in 1942.

Following his graduation, Urie married Liese Price in Ann Arbor and immediately enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he served as a psychologist in the Air Corps, the Office of Strategic Services, and, following completion of officer training, in the Army Medical Corps. After demobilization, he served briefly as assistant chief clinical psychologist for research in the newly created V.A. Clinical Psychology Training Program in Washington, D.C. Following this stint in what was to become an important agency for the training of future psychologists, Urie joined the faculty at the University of Michigan for two years as Assistant Professor in Psychology. He left this post to join the Cornell faculty, with appointments in the Departments of Child Development and Family Studies and of Psychology. He was asked to become chairman of Psychology but found himself more attracted to what was then the College of Home Economics because his colleagues there were immersed in questions about children and families that he found compelling, and in running a nursery school and extension programs that he wished to join. In 1969, he played a leading role in the programmatic changes leading to the formation of the College of Human Ecology.

Urie and Liese settled in Forest Home, close to the woods and gorges their growing family came to love, and where they remained for more than 50 years. They had six children and nine grandchildren.

From the very beginning of his scholarly work, Urie contributed to three mutually reinforcing projects: 1) developing theory and research designs at the frontiers of developmental science; 2) laying out the implications and applications of developmental research for policy and practice; and 3) communicating—through articles, lectures and discussions—the findings of developmental research to students, the general public, and to policy makers, both in the private and the public sectors. In hundreds of research articles and four landmark volumes—*Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.* (with John Condry, Jr., 1970), *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979), *The State of Americans* (1996), and *Making Human Beings Human* (2005)—he laid out his ideas and elucidated both the extant empirical support as well as the lacunae that awaited exploration.

The Ecology of Human Development was hailed as groundbreaking, establishing Bronfenbrenner's place at the forefront of his field and transforming the way many social and behavioral scientists approached the study of human beings and their environments. His starting point was the observation that historically the study of early development had been conducted "out of context," that is, in the laboratory rather than in the environments within which children grow and develop, what he called "the study of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest period of time." He maintained that development needs to be understood in its ecological context, as

“the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between those settings, and by the larger contexts in which those settings are embedded.”

His theoretical model led to new directions in basic research and to applications in the design of programs and policies affecting the well being of children and families, including helping to shape Head Start. The ecological approach to human development shattered barriers among the social sciences, built bridges among the disciplines, and linked research to policy and practice. Later in his career, Urie extended this theory, adding “bio” to “ecological” in recognition of his long-held view that biological resources were also important to understanding human development. But for him, biological potential was no more than potential. Whether it was brought to fruition depended on the presence of enduring, reciprocal, highly interactive processes between a developing organism and other individuals or objects in the environment, a view that anticipated our current understanding of gene-environment interaction.

Urie’s widely published contributions won him numerous honors and awards both at home and abroad. He held many honorary doctoral degrees. In 1996, Division 7 of the American Psychological Association established a Lifetime Award for the Contribution to Developmental Psychology in the Service of Science and Society; they named it The Bronfenbrenner Award and made him its first recipient. Two years earlier, he had been awarded the prestigious James McKeen Cattell Award for Lifetime Contribution by the American Psychological Society. Cornell’s Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center, a place for multidisciplinary research on human development, is a living memorial to Urie.

After the intellectual contributions are noted, major honors listed, and his profound influence on students acknowledged, there remains for those who knew Urie a persistent memory of the sheer joy he exuded: at being with or simply speaking of his family, listening to music, showing off Liese’s art, telling a story, singing, hiking, or having a good argument. His was a great soul. We are diminished by his passing.

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