Urie Bronfenbrennner

- Born 4/29/1917 in Moscow, Russia; Died 9/25/2005 in Ithaca, NY
- Spouse – Liese Bronfenbrenner
- Ph.D. from University of Michigan (1942); Ed.M. from Harvard University (1940); A.B. from Cornell University (1938)

Major Employment:

- U.S. Army/Air Force - 1942-1946, Psychologist
- University of Michigan –1946-1948, Psychology
- Cornell University –1948-2005, Psychology

Major Areas of Work:

- Human Ecology, Ecological Systems Theory, Head Start Program Co-Founder

SRCD Affiliation:

- Governing Council Member (1959-1965)

SRCD Oral History Interview

Urie Bronfenbrenner

Interviewed by Glen Elder
October 25, 1998

Elder: Urie, you were born in Moscow, and I wonder if you would tell briefly about your parents, your mother and your father and the people around you at that time. And then talk about the transition to the United States.

Bronfenbrenner: I take it you mean not just the time that I was born, but the period before we left for the United States.

Elder: Before you left, that's right.

Bronfenbrenner: Well, let me begin with a lovely comment my father made. He said (this was later, of course, when I was a Cornell student already)--he said, "You know the most important decision you ever make in your life is choosing the right parents, and you did reasonably well." I think that nothing is more important than that fact. I was very, very lucky in that choice. One of its most important consequences, which I never realized really until I ended up back in the Soviet Union to be an exchange scientist there, is that the effect of that was to give me two cultures. But it was something that my parents did knowingly. In fact, I've forgotten when this was said, but it was around the table that, "There's a gift we wish to give you. It's the richest gift we can give you and that is the remarkable Russian language. Here at home we'll be talking as we always have, in Russian." And so everything that I experienced came through in a Russian version with, of necessity, the perspective of that culture looking at what was happening in my world as I became at home in the American world. As I told you

before, I remember a brief period when I couldn't understand anything and then a period when I understood everything, and I have no memory of a transition period, which somehow must have gotten lost, repressed, whatever you want to call it. Many years later when I'm visiting this scientist in the Soviet Union, Leon Tolstoy, he said to me, "You know--

Elder: Leon Tolstoy.

Bronfenbrenner: Leon Tolstoy was the pupil of Berkovsky. His official position was Dean of the Behavioral Social Sciences University, a great university in Moscow. He was head of the psychology department in the university, a very powerful dean, and the leading behavioral social scientist in the Soviet Union at the time. And he said to me, "You know you are not American, you're Russian. You think like a Russian, you talk like a Russian, you are a member of our culture and don't you forget it." I had no idea. Obviously he was also being a gentleman and all that, but I did discover that I had these other pieces that other Americans didn't have. But I always thought of myself as a perfectly American kid, and it was only when I got there that I realized that in a number of ways he was correct. It also made it very easy for me to understand their behavioral social science because I was a product of that culture. So I understood things when I first encountered them there that I never knew before, but I was able to understand them when they would come up. I think I've told you there was another scientist and we had to go for a walk in Gorky Park. It was Leon Tolstoy before the days they could, you know, pick you up no matter where you were. I knew something was coming, and he began by saying, "You know we want to express our gratitude to you because you understand things, etc., etc., etc." But I could tell something was coming, and he said, "You are very good at reading between the lines, but for God's sake when are you going to learn to talk between the lines!"

Elder: Well, this notion/experience of crossing cultures--two cultures is thought of as a very formative experience in many people's lives in science. What is it about the Russian culture that you think has been really instrumental in your thinking?

Bronfenbrenner: You're asking specifically about the Russian culture because I think there are also things that no matter what the other culture is are very powerful if you're in the social behavioral sciences.

Elder: Let's start with the Russian culture and move from there.

Bronfenbrenner: Well, the main thing that's Russian moves immediately to my mother because she never came to the United States psychologically, and she gave me Russian literature. What happens in the Russian culture, at least in those days and even when I was there (I don't know what it is like now), is that Russian literature was something that everyone lived in. People would sit around the table and argue about characters in a novel as if they were part of your close friends. There would be real hot arguments, you know, about what these characters would think and do, and why they did what they did. She read to me in Russian. And I was already reading in Russian when I came to the U.S., and that continued because she stayed there. What I didn't realize is that some of the most rich--and what's remarkable about it, I'm being specific about the Russian case now, is that that literature deals with the role of the individual in the culture and the society. So you are constantly getting that interface at the level of, not a research data or science, but at the level of some of the best reporting of what human beings and culture are like in any literature in the world. And I didn't realize until much later that that was having a lot to do with the formal things I began doing. Namely a person in, not just situations, but in the larger context of all those things that I talked about is the result of that because I was forced by the experiences always to be seeing it from this other point of view.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, Fritz Riedel had us read Freud; it was all

familiar. Yet Freud for me I still remember because in my father's study there were all these books and there was the Freud stuff, both in Russian and German, and I said, "What's that book about dad?" "Oh," he said, "It's a remarkable book. It's the best study we have of the influence of"--now what's the name of the drug in English? It's not opium, but something or other--that this is a very fine scientist, and he didn't at that time know about the non-scientific Freud. He said, "This is a very fine study of the influence of this drug on the person." I wish I could remember the American equivalent.

Elder: Was it a pain killer?

Bronfenbrenner: No, it was a study of the effects. It might have been a pain killer, but it was addictive. Well, anyone who knows Freud, his early work was on that drug. So that is, I think, the answer so far as Russian culture is concerned. And part of that is that every Russian scientist, whatever the discipline, was living in that literature. So you didn't have the line between the hard sciences and the soft sciences, whatever you call them, because every hard scientist could argue with you about, "what was it that Natasha was doing when she," that sort of stuff. As the usual case was, "Hey people, it's time to have dinner." "Just a minute, we have to settle this question." So it was that kind of thing. And the other thing that I just mentioned, meal times were a very important time. Often times you didn't have much food, but that was the time for getting together and talking about life and its implications. So you had a community of scientists that crossed the traditional lines that we often don't get crossed here.

Elder: So you came from Russia, the Soviet Union, to the United States characterized by individualism.

Bronfenbrenner: Yes, that's the other side of the story. Do you want to go there now?

Elder: Yes.

Bronfenbrenner: Well, not only did I come to the United States, but when I went back to the Soviet Union I couldn't stand the violation, the violation of individualism. And the individualism came in a very fortunate way.

Elder: You went back to the Soviet Union in about 1962, wasn't it?

Bronfenbrenner: Right about there. Virtually I had no contact except with the emigrants. I think I told you about this. In Letchworth our home was one of the places to which emigrants would be directed. "Go up there and see Sasha and Gaina; it's quiet there and they will take care of you." This becomes relevant because one of the main groups that came that way were Russians who had gone to Germany and had gotten their Ph.D.'s. In that period, when psychology was at its peak in German science, they came to our home and they were talking about all the great German figures, and Gestalt was a word that I had heard around as I was playing with my imaginary games; there would be this guy Gestalt, and I finally asked who is he. He said, "He isn't a guy." "What does it mean?" "It means pattern." So that whole generation would come through speaking in Russian, but using the German terms. So without knowing it I was exposed to Gestalt psychology.

When I came to Cornell's psych department there were these two psychologists who were not allowed to be a member at that time. They were both Gestaltists and wrote the first gestalt textbook in developmental. And one of them was the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and he enabled Frank Freeman to get a post as one of the two or three at that time--I can remember two Jewish.

Elder: When you encountered gestalt theory thinking, how did that seem? Did that seem part of

your background in some ways?

Bronfenbrenner: In certain ways because the arguments were all in Russian, and I had some sense of this. And also the other thing is these were all--I was going to say all men, but it's not true because of Lewin's three greats--the women I got to meet, not all three--were in my house. And my friends and I teased them terribly, but they were a part of this discussion and the notion of pattern made a lot of sense because the thing is, you would talk about the organized person as a totality rather than in terms of variables, which was the other mode. I had no idea that this was anything important. So that's why I say just shear chance enters into this picture time and again, and I was just at the right point when I could meet them and had the language. And then as I became a researcher the whole transition and entry of what was for me a very exciting thing, and that was that group at Yale, and how he brought them reinforcement. And all of a sudden in my mind was, as I look back, a very important revolution. That was the beginning of process--beginning of process as against these set categories without any dynamic that this was your personality and that's the way you were. This was your genetics; and this is where you grew up; and that's the way it was; and there was no--

Elder: Wasn't Soviet thinking process-oriented?

Bronfenbrenner: It was. That's what I am saying. Soviet thinking was very process-oriented, in part because of the literature side, which was full of process--because, as you know, people were changing and not changing and there were the questions of why, what was happening, and how come the same person could behave in different ways; all of that was right there. So this fusion was put together in this curious terrible context in which you had the most violent and cruel right beside the most perceptive and sophisticated so that the torturers had the same background as the tortured. Therefore, when the torturers got into power they could really make life horrible.

Elder: Now you started with your mother and her importance in language and giving you that connection with the Soviet culture and Russian culture, but let's go back to the beginning with your father. He was very important in your life in a different way. But who was in the family circle before you came to this country? Who were the members of the family?

Bronfenbrenner: Before that?

Elder: Yes.

Bronfenbrenner: There--my memory, of course, is--there were all these people. I grew up, as I think you know, on the grounds of this mill in Odessa, which was the first steam-powered flour mill in all of Russia. Built by Germans and Jews were taught how to run it because they were, you might say, the only ones available to run it. That means understanding the mechanics of what you had to do. It was essentially a closed area guarded by the police, by the way, in every government because this was the basic food. So that was a community and everyone in that community, of course, knew each other very well, and they knew me. In other words, they knew who I was and spent time with me, but I have very little memory of them except that they were always there and whenever I would see them they would come up, and that was important. But to answer your question more concretely, I remember clearly that my paternal grandfather (that's my father's father) had been shot by the Cossacks for teaching the Russian workers at the mill how to read. That was a crime; and he was shot dead, so I never knew him. But I'm named for him, which, as you know, those are powerful things.

Elder: Yes.

Bronfenbrenner: These are powerful things. So he stands clear, and I can see his picture. I can see my

maternal grandmother's face; she was a quiet wizened woman, and that's about all that I remember. But my grandfather, he was chief mechanic of the mill. He was a very warm person, and I was his grandson. He was a very kind man. So my memory of him is one of, nothing will ever go wrong when I'm with my grandfather and that males are friendly. The other is that there were a lot of children there and they were my playmates, and they knew me, and I knew them, but I have very little recollection; I can't remember any one of them.

There is one other mention: my mother's sister was a very fine pianist, as was my father, and they used to play duets. And there was someone around who would also be singing and knew these songs. The other thing that becomes very important in my life is my mother. Odessa's a port, and ships from all lands stopped there. And my mother knew songs, including songs in American and songs in French and, of course, the Russian songs and Ukrainian songs, which are all around us. And all of these being songs that sailors and people like that prefer were very much about ordinary life, and the beauty of the countryside and of nature, and of human relationships; love songs, songs of hate. It's the tie in between these and the literature, and so the literature and the music were like that and they both spoke to the same themes, namely individual human beings in a broader context. The sailors were all away from home and a lot of their songs were songs about the sea and what was going on. And they were fascinating songs as I look back because they talked about what was going on.

Elder: Life stories.

Bronfenbrenner: Life stories and insights (sings an excerpt of a song).

Elder: Now on your mother's side, music was very important. Did it go back to her parents?

Bronfenbrenner: No. I do not now understand that. It was her sister who was playing the duets with my father, so there is something in that family too. And she became both a first-rate performer and teacher. But then she survived because she went to Estonia, which is how we were able to get out.

Elder: How did you get down from Moscow to Odessa?

Bronfenbrenner: I think I mentioned this to you. When I first came to the Soviet Union, because my Russian was pretty good, they knew right away that it was my mother tongue. Therefore, I was a suspicious character sent from America and so I would often get--just for the first year--this question, "Where were you born?" Which, they of course knew. I said, "Right here in Moscow." "What month?" I said, "April the 29th." And when they asked me for my birthday something happened in the tone when I answered April 29th, and I didn't think much of it but it happened from different people. Remember, they are talking about an event in 1917. What in the hell is the matter?

Elder: That's right (laughter).

Bronfenbrenner: You got it right away. So the same colleague and friend that I mentioned said, "Learn how to talk between the lines," I once asked him, I said, "You know I have this funny thing. I may be imagining it, but whenever I said April 29th something funny happens." "Of course," he said, "We knew you were lying." "You knew I was lying?" He said, "That was before the Bolsheveck Revolution, and even when you take into account the 13 days difference in the calendar, Jews were not legally permitted in Moscow still at that time. There were only two kinds of Jews around." He was not talking about me; he was talking about my parents (those who were trying to pass, and those who were being protected by the anti-Communists). Can you imagine that? And it's still alive and well. So they are troubled that this American has this history not to be trusted, and they were right. How did it happen that my father and mother where in Moscow and we came from Odessa? How come? Well, Odessa's a

seaport. Every disease existing in the world came into Odessa. My father was an expert on these plagues. Moscow had nobody who knew about plagues and they needed someone. They essentially ordered him and he said, "I'll come. My wife is pregnant, can she come with me?"

Elder: Now then, you were born in Moscow then you came back to Odessa?

Bronfenbrenner: That's correct. We went back to Odessa and I remember my father telling me how he would stand in front of the hospital door and direct the different wards that had different epidemics in Moscow. So now how that interfaces, of course, is the definition of who I was when I got to know the Russians. But the funniest thing is the first time I ever met Luria, he said to me, "Bronfenbrenner, I just this morning treated a little boy whose name is Bronfenbrenner." With a twinkle in his eye I know the name. He's part of the Jewish intellectuals in that period, and he was of course Luria. You know who he was, and he was a student of Vigotsky. So all of those things gave me a kind of identity in that situation from which it was possible for me to know I had admission into aspects of Soviet science that would be very difficult for any other American to get because I was innocent. I myself was innocent, and I was the victim of these circumstances. No, I chose the right parents at the right time.

Elder: This was your trip to the Soviet Union in 1962.

Bronfenbrenner: The first one when people still didn't know who I was and that kept up for the next trip, but by then it became clear.

Elder: Well, let's go back to your father, but just to get clear the people, you had a sister who had been born when you were in the Soviet Union.

Bronfenbrenner: No, there had been a stillborn.

Elder: So you came to this country as an only child.

Bronfenbrenner: Yes. There was a stillborn and there was no food, no anything. Infant mortality was almost a daily event.

Elder: What year was it that you came to this country?

Bronfenbrenner: 1923.

Elder: So you experienced the famine, didn't you, in a major way before you came here?

Bronfenbrenner: I think I've told you this before that I did not really appreciate how much I was given by my mother because she was regarded as a weak person who was always ill. And, of course, the fact that she was giving me the language and the literature was not something that anyone would do with a child, except she was remarkably talented and that she was also a very good, how shall I put it, actress (with a small "a"). When we read literature she became the character. But when my father left, he had to escape. He had to escape because--and this is another thing about the meaning of the peer group. He grew up at that mill and the kids he hung around with, not only in the mill but in Odessa, many of them became leaders in the revolution. And when he became a doctor they, of course, had no money. He was their physician for no charge. You know this business about friendship; the Russian culture is something much more; it's an irrational commitment.

He told me this story: They came to him one day and they said, "Sasha, you better get out of here, they are going to get your kind, and you better go and we'll help you. We have connections to get you out of

here. One thing, don't bring anything valuable." That's a separate story. He escapes. They knew he was a good swimmer. He swam around to Romania. But before that, he had to argue with them. The only thing he was allowed to keep was his wooden stethoscope because he said, "Without this I cannot be a doctor and that is how I make my living." These were other people who were doing this. They were a gang. These people set it up for him and then he got in the hands of these guys who financed all their activities by requiring people to pay to escape. Doctors were forbidden to leave the Soviet Union. So what is now happening is my mother's left alone with me. What do they do? She would take me to all the consulates and she would say, "This is my child (and at the appropriate time she would pinch me and I would cry) and my terrible husband left me, deserted me. I have a sister in Estonia, my sister Monia. They will take care of me and my little child." She was an attractive, charming woman and she could charm anybody to take care of me. That's how, when my father died, she kept charming one or another emigrant relative who would help her. She immediately left Letchworth Village to go to New York, and those skills, those were part of life. I can get along and I love it. I love these relationships with people and it's not my intent. With her it was a calculated thing. But the secretaries here, they were always very helpful to me.

Elder: When I came to Kendall and they said, "Oh, you mean the singing man!"

Bronfenbrenner: I love that!

Elder: Did they say that at Kendall?

Bronfenbrenner: Yes, they did!

Elder: That's a new one to me. I didn't know that!

Bronfenbrenner: Now they say if you are going to be a developmental scientist, what skills would you like to have that you didn't have to work to get. So you see what I'm saying, and these were not things that I studied, they were things that I was learning in the world in which I was dumped.

Elder: That's right.

Bronfenbrenner: And then I come to the United States.

Elder: Now you go to Estonia, and do you stay there?

Bronfenbrenner: We stayed there for seven or eight months until my father managed to get to the United States where he had a brother who had run away. And that's a separate story because he was an anarchist, a sincere anarchist. Things were so hard in the revolution of 1906. And he got his Ph.D. at the Pastor Institute in France, came to the United States, and he was then faculty at Harvard as an immunologist. So finally my dad gets to Boston and my uncle--there were three uncles: Uasha, Sasha, and Misha--those three arranged for him to get a post as a laboratory neuropathologist at the Jewish hospital in Montafura Hospital. In those days Jews couldn't, in effect, practice medicine in the state. So I come there and that begins another piece of extraordinary work.

Elder: How old were you then would you say?

Bronfenbrenner: I arrived just before my sixth birthday not knowing a word of English, and I was entered into the first grade. There was not kindergarten, so that dates it exactly.

Elder: And then you moved from there to Letchworth?

Bronfenbrenner: I moved from there to Letchworth about a year later, and that was a very important experience. So even though it's only less than a year, it defines American society for me as a place that I love. And that definition kept being reinforced. That is where it began.

Elder: What was it about that experience that did that?

Bronfenbrenner: The paper because I came in and at that time when we were in a section of Pittsburgh called Minersville. That's where the folks that worked in the steel mills and all the rest--and they were from everywhere--Poles, Italians. The Jews came, but they didn't work in the steel mills; they had little shops, stuff like that. And there were blacks coming from down south. And we all lived in the same neighborhood, all these--kids included. Of course, the majority were American and mainly from poor backgrounds. Also West Virginia, Scotch, Irish and English, and they were all there. All of us, me in the middle, arms around each other--and leaving there was a crisis.

One of the marks of it was, every place that I loved in life I would leave some article of clothing there, and I left my winter coat there. And here we are going to upstate New York! It was too late to get back into the school; we had train reservations the next day. And when I came to school in Habberstraw the same thing happened, except now we have Presbyterians on the hill and they were American. For me it was baseball and all that stuff. My parents didn't understand, but the door was always open to these friends of mine and they would come. And that continued and I married a woman who does the same thing--all our friends have been in our home. So now you see the continuity. So for me the peer group was, I didn't know it scientifically until much later, but one of the first things I wrote and recorded was a record for extension. That was something about the importance of peers. It was very funny to me when this gal comes out and says, 'peer' are all important and the family doesn't mean anything, and that was that. Impact of Peers, that's the title of the record. It was played all over, and it was one of those big old things. And as you know, when I came back they offered me, after the war, chair. I said, "No, I have the outfit up in --

Elder: On the hill.

Bronfenbrenner: Psychology course. Back then it was home economics; they still have that. I said I want to be with real people, I don't want to work just with rats and sophomores. It was not a very political thing to say but that was just Slats.

Elder: This was the time when you were talking about your friends and sort of adopting your father.

Bronfenbrenner: That's when we moved to Letchworth. To be accurate about it, my mother was a very hospitable person, so already as soon as I get to school in Pittsburgh she was always there. There was always something--let me get something for you. You know that's tradition, and she was also very charming with them and they liked to come there. So when we moved to Letchworth, she doesn't know English but nevertheless has nice relationships with the other doctors' wives and the wives of the people who are not--you know the wives of the mechanics and so on. But, "Oh, my heart!" Oh, this, you know, always dying. And the attitude that I picked up from my mother is, you know, your mother gives all these false alarms. So guests, my friends are in our house.

Elder: And you've always believed that.

Bronfenbrenner: I've always believed that. And I always believed that my life in each of those was very important because they didn't understand the world around them, and I had the inside track. Those kids knew everything, and we knew how to get around our parents and all that stuff, and I loved that

business of 'you gotta play fair.' When we chose volleyball--this was in Letchworth--everybody could play volleyball, but you change the rules for the little ones, and you change the rules for the grandfathers who wanted to play volleyball. All that was sort of part of it; you adjust things so that everybody can be a member of the community and, of course, were now. And once we get to Letchworth, we're part of a small little village of fields.

Elder: From a big city to the small--

Bronfenbrenner: The former FBI agent, whose territory included fields in New York, is in Kendall now. You know, the world is small so we talk about it. He says, "Yeah, I used to visit there regularly. The policeman, Joe MacDonald--I know Joe MacDonald!" There is a curious thing connecting back up when toward the end of my life, who do I meet but somebody at the beginning. And we're pals, you know, we know the streets; we know the community. There were only three hundred people in the little community. So there we are now.

Elder: At Letchworth you talk a lot about the role of your father.

Bronfenbrenner: It really begins to open up. No, it's earlier than that, before my father became ill. It was always the case that I would introduce friends to my father. My father would always find something in common and they would like to stay and talk with my dad. My mother was very sweet, but they didn't get into conversations, partly because she had an accent and partly because her world was not their world, except that they knew they were perfectly at home and so on and so forth; they loved to come there. So then, first of all, he is a very good observer, and we would often be out of doors on a porch. He would say, "Hey look at that," and would point out things in nature so it started at that level. Then it's really when I go to college, and he is now filled with tuberculosis and he is ill, before he goes to the institution. And then once again after he comes back and we're now in our home, then is when I bring my fraternity brothers there. Johnny Clawson--he became a father figure for John. John would come and he would go right up to my father's bedroom and they would talk, and it was understood without anybody ever saying so that that was none of my business. But notice those two and you very well know what the peer group has meant to me professionally.

Elder: You can't pass it around.

Bronfenbrenner: Can't pass it around. You don't want them to get it published before you do, which was always a great fear of mine of course!

Elder: Well, in going to Cornell you had a number of formative, influential experiences then. Kurt Lewin was here, wasn't he, at that time?

Bronfenbrenner: Kurt Lewin was here I think the first year I came. I knew nothing about that until I got to know Frank Freeman. I think this is an important vignette for the history of our field--how did Kurt Lewin get to Cornell? Well, you would say, here was his pupil, Frank Freeman, who worked with him in Berlin. That's not how he started. Ethel Waring (in home economics) on one of her sabbaticals went to Berlin because she was one of the founders of the field of marriage intent and she knew that the Germans had done stuff about this. And I guess she learned German, and she met Kurt Lewin. And then she immediately decided (she was, by the way, a widow and strong woman, intelligent) that I needed some education. That's after I came, and saw to it. She got the idea that Kurt Lewin and his theory was important if you want to change society, so she needed somebody to help her. She went back to Frank Freeman and he said, "No." We could never get him in, so she, in effect, brought him, and the fact that the dean was a pupil of (inaudible) and studied in Germany enabled him to get over the problem that Kurt Lewin was Jewish. (And, however, they didn't have a place for him in hard sciences, but it

was okay for him to be placed in home economics).

So now we have Kurt Lewin here, but I don't know about it yet, and I don't find out about it until I come back in 1948. But I did know that there was this home economics there, and I did know what the department was doing because Slats was the one who knew. And he knew what I had done during the war, and he knew me in person--John and all the rest of it--and he wanted to change the nature of psychology with my help. And I said, "I can't. These are my former teachers and that won't work." I said, "What about that place with the kids up there?" And Bob Dalton, who was a student of Henry Murray's--Henry Murray had written to Bob Dalton because I had worked with Henry Murray at the Selection Center; he was the head of it. Henry Murray wrote a letter to his pupil who was Bob Dalton. Bob Dalton, at that time, was the Chair of Department of Child Development and Family Relationships, and I think the second man ever to be there in the department at all except in extension, and he got the idea of getting me there. So that's what happened, and Bob as a pupil of Henry's was very much a psychological, clinical, intuitive kind of psychologist who really didn't understand what I was up to, but was a very good therapist.

Elder: Well, let's get back to the study of peers and peer influences. That's one of the first things that you really did here, isn't it?

Bronfenbrenner: First things I really did, and I remember making that decision explicitly and saying all this stuff about family, family, family. Remember where I was--it's all family, family, family! I know that peer groups are important, and there are no studies on peer group, and I don't want to be identified with the sentimental view of the family that was still then pervasive. Although I didn't realize the people there who had sociological backgrounds like Lemo Rockwood. Those women said, "This young man may have some possibilities, but he needs a lot of understanding that he doesn't have about what's out there in this state of New York," and they made it their business. And it was extraordinary for me because I hadn't met strong women before, and they were. And they had a sense of humor about it because the men didn't see through it, you see. The men there in the higher circle, they had already managed to disconnect it from the Ag College, and you can imagine that was a loss in power that the College of Agriculture didn't particularly like. But those women were not going to have those men in the way of what they felt needed to be done for the families of the state of New York. That's where Head Start--

Elder: Right, that's how you got really into that.

Bronfenbrenner: That's how I knew because I used to go with them out in the field, which is something they don't do anymore now. By then I had done enough stuff in other cultures that I said, "I need to see what's out there." They wanted me to, you know, answer, "What can you give to the extension?" And I said, "Gee, I don't know. I've got to get out there." What I did have was Letchworth Village and the small communities. But I didn't know that was what I knew, you know what I mean? So you can see why I have this deep sense of debt to America, to the United States and its dreams made real. Those dreams were given as realities to me, and I knew damn well that the peer group was a big powerful thing. Not that I used that as a logical argument, no I just said, "Where's the peer group here? Where's my peer group?" You know? What I know is working in these families must be--and I also knew them, and got along with them and they got along with me. Again, because my parents let them in and tolerated them even though some of them were regarded as, you know, 'bad articles' in the local schools.

Elder: The kind of studies that were going on in the family with children were sort of studies of children inside the family. That was not something you really thought adequate at all at that point.

Bronfenbrenner: It's not that I didn't think how adequate it was; it didn't square with my own

experience. I wasn't being critical; I was sort of saying, "Hey, where's this piece?" And I wasn't being militant, you know, criticizing publicly. I just said, "The impact of peers, let's bring that into the picture."

Elder: But it wasn't really the study of peers isolated from family either.

Bronfenbrenner: Oh, definitely not. It was the study of peer groups as power contexts of what was then socialization and that the peer group had an--they had rules, they were not just, you know, escapees from the family. And you had to play by the rules, and then you let the rules loose when it seemed necessary for the peer group to function, and that was the lesson. Freedom and Discipline and I think that was one of the titles of those earlier essays.

Elder: Yes, it was. Freedom and Discipline is one of your essays.

Bronfenbrenner: That's right, and they are present in both contexts; and they are present across contexts. That is, the parents who have touch with the peer group have status there, therefore the kids will say, "Oh, alright."

Elder: This notion of the peer group as an extension of the family was not something that a lot of people bought; they really saw them as adversaries.

Bronfenbrenner: They saw them as adversaries, sure. And it was very often even an explicit issue in terms of 'I don't want you to have contact with those children.' Partly, it was class; partly, it was bad behavior. When they did come in the house they didn't say good morning, you know all that stuff.

Elder: When you think of people like James Coleman who came out with the Adolescent Society in 1961, that saw the peer group at large. It was almost a David Riesman version, apart from family.

Bronfenbrenner: That was the difference. It wasn't peer group, and it wasn't that there wasn't peer group interacting with the family because I was coming from the family style. But our big message was: we got to build a peer group in the family; we can't study the family in isolation.

Elder: One of your pieces in the 1950s dealt with sense of responsibility and leadership in the context of kids.

Bronfenbrenner: That's right, all of those things, because in many ways that's where I learned it. I mean, those guys--and the other thing that happened is that I had very close friends in Haberstam. My school was there, and I used to get in their homes. And the parents and the children in an Irish home are real close.

I think I told you that story that when my father got sent to the institution for tuberculosis. The first thing that happened is Bill Brophy, an Irish guy, became my buddy. Pat Brophy and Maggie, his parents, whom we'd come to know, lived in Grassy Point, New York. They came and they said, "Mrs. Bronfenbrenner, we're going to take a vacation; we're going to Niagara Falls. Would you and Urie like to come? Bill would so like to have Urie along." That car of theirs was tied together with wire; it kept breaking down. These people had no money, but they said, "This is our son's friend." They knew my mother by then, but father isn't there. He was a janitor and she was a mother, and the link is the peer group so there we are. Jim Farley, do you remember who he was? He's from Grassy Point, New York. He knew the Brophys. They were constituents. You see what I am trying to say by that? For me that was what had to be understood because of the power of those interfaces.

Elder: Well, it's the civilizing influence of the peer group and the pluralism--

Bronfenbrenner: And the pluralism and, of course, same at baseball. The lovely movie, the two ball teams--all of that stuff plays here--play a very important role here because that's what happened. I told you that lovely story when recently my classmate came to visit me here. Oh, that was lovely. He came and he brought with him a yearbook, and he calls me up and he says, "Can we get together?" And I said, "Sure." In that yearbook were pictures of all 37 members of our graduating class from high school. I look at it and I name first name and last name of everyone in that class, including the girls as well at the boys. And we both, I mean, it's not that I did it and he didn't; no this was our gang. And then comes this lovely thing, he says, "Remember about the time when we won the local pennant in baseball and we went to New York?" I said, "No. No, I didn't go on that trip." "Oh, it was a great trip. We saw the Yankees; we saw Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth; we won." And we said afterwards, "We need to get something to eat." They look around, they find a place that looks like they are comfortable and they'd say, "Can we get something to eat here?" And the guy says, "Yeah, all of you except him," and he points to the black. "Do you remember it happened?" I said, "Norm, I wasn't there." He says, "Without anybody having to say a word, everybody turned around and walked out." We're having none of that. Curtis M's picture was right there; I can still see it. And he was saying, "You know, things have changed; they are much worse now." It was better then. Curtis M was one of us. What the hell do they think they were doing? That's before all of this--that's 19--let's see, I graduated in 1934. Yeah, 1934.

Elder: How do you then deal with the sort of 'Lord of the Flies' phenomenon where children sort of pick-up--

Bronfenbrenner: How do I deal with it in what sense?

Elder: Well, you think of peer groups as sort of an extension of the family here--

Bronfenbrenner: You're asking how I deal with that cognitively.

Elder: That's right, or analytically--

Bronfenbrenner: Analytically or theoretically.

Elder: That's right, sure.

Bronfenbrenner: Well, as you know, I talk about growing chaos in the lives of children, youth and family. What does that mean? That means that the connections are broken down. You have the isolated peer group, where the peer group has connections only with itself and that was in the area writing already. When you have that happen, when you lose the bridge, socialization can no longer take place. I wrote about that, in fact, that what they were trying to do they desperately need; they're trying to find within their own age group the controls that they know they need and they don't find them and you get chaos; nothing gets socialized. I'm exaggerating now. So you have violence and cruelty and sadism in these groups. That's the whole business about the microsystem. You gotta have the next level, which is the meso-system that's the bridge between the two. Without that, neither one can perform its function as a context of proximal processes and so on. So theoretically it's absolutely essential to have the peer group, and the peer group becomes the mechanism of transition prior to the intense bonds of heterosexuality. So you can learn how to relate to somebody who is your own age before you get the big kick in the sex, and that's its function. It's a transition structure, which in then (and coming from the Russian side of it), is also a bombed for the rest of our life, if possible (and the "if possible" goes in there), and remains, 'he's my old buddy,' and that still happens to me when these old fraternity brothers or the guy who had the room next to mine at the dorms--and what do you mean

nothing will come between us?

Elder: Well, I remember you going to the Soviet Union and you were going there to study the peer group.

Bronfenbrenner: That's right. That was the purpose. I'd forgotten that. I was going to study there because there the peer group has formal status.

Elder: That's right.

Bronfenbrenner: Now there's a piece of fascinating unconscious guiding the conscious. You tell me that and I'm still surprised. You mean that was why I went to the Soviet Union? And you are saying, "Really, damn right," because that was right there and that's what drew me, and I didn't understand the connection. Even now it surprises me. It was that peer group interest that made me apply, not the study of the Soviet family, which you know was what everybody was talking about; I went to study the Soviet peer group. And oh, yes, that's because that started when they got the internauts [classes] and they were taking the kids out of the families into the internauts. These communist scholars thought that they could separate the kids from the non-equalitarian system of the family and put them in the proper -- oh, the theory that guided that revolution! In any case, the effect was equalitarian to take away authority and have them be loyal comrades. We're going to educate them separately and be sure that they have the right values and not those of American rich men. These are the idealists, and some of them are very gifted and very capable in relating to the kids. That was a tragedy. I think I quoted someone to you when I said some years later, "Is it true that the internauts are being closed? Why were they closed?" "Urie, you have to understand, no peer group can do what a mother can do at home." A wise old man! Did you meet him?

Elder: No.

Bronfenbrenner: Too bad. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He was Ukrainian, and he was the one that they sent to the United States. Why? Because they knew he could relate the cross-cultural enemies. The Ukrainians, you know, were under Russian power, but they wanted independence.

Elder: You continued this work on the peer group; you had two worlds of childhood, which was really looking at Soviet system and the American system and you have the individualism and the--

Bronfenbrenner: And at that point you notice the theoretical structure was simply the structure without the--as I think about it now, Gary was working with me and he asked the question, "How come?" And it came out in this; why in the more recent writings do I talk about Proposition One and Two and don't mention anything of the emotional ties. And I said that was conscious. I knew that if we started anything that had to do with emotions that it wouldn't be regarded as scientific. And furthermore, the notion that this business of irrational commitment and I still in my seminar, oh boy do I get it, "Why does it have to be irrational?" I said, "It doesn't have to be, it is." And "Where is it?" And I'll say, "Well, primarily in the family, that's where it is. First in the parent/child relationship; not just mothers, fathers can be as irrational." And they say, "Why do you have to call it irrational? Why can't we just talk about a strong emotional relationship?" I said, "Emotional relationships are not necessarily irrational, this one is." Then I say, "The next place, of course, is husband/wife, and that's what make proximal processes go." You know when that first came up, very interesting, I was not conscious. I first wrote that up when it was a paper for UNESCO, not for the USA. Now I do it quite deliberately. I say, "You can't bring that stuff up especially because there is no base for it, because one of the most important irrational bonds is friendship and boy is that strong in the Soviet Union," in Russia I should be saying. It's where friends give up their life for their friends and that isn't just my pal. And we really

don't have that as something which is understood across, except, of course, in certain minority groups.

Elder: Comradeship and friendship in the military, you think of what a comrade is versus a friend. With a friend, you still maintain your individuality, and comradeship--

Bronfenbrenner: This is the adult, you say the woman or the man you are in love with, that's where the biology goes along; but the other is also, and you have to be very careful when you say this, that same need is also biological. That's why we can't 'dismiss' homosexualism, or whatever we now call it, because that thing has a meaning; and it's not the same meaning as the heterosexual one, but it packs a wallop. And if you declare it unconstitutional, you and the whole society are going to be in deep trouble.

Elder: The thing that I remember you saying that you discovered in your lecture notes is that you had actually the architecture of the ecology of human development. Now when was that that you were doing that?

Bronfenbrenner: That is very easy to date. It's when we had to move to Kendall and I had to unpack all that stuff. I had to decide what I needed to keep, and I threw away some things I shouldn't of. And what I discovered was the ecology of human development was in my lecture notes, about what interaction I was going to initiate. You know, and I would say, "Is there any other thing besides the mother/child relationship?" And I would say, "How about,"--and I wasn't yet putting in formal theory or realized that was where I was headed, which means I was being driven by this other set of experiences. Also within the United States because you knew John Clausen and how close we were, and in his case it was helped by the fact that he didn't have it with his father, and he didn't have it--

Elder: His father was a very austere person.

Bronfenbrenner: Very austere. And he met my father and all of a sudden there was a man who wasn't austere; he respected us. He was probably a very decent man, but he had integrity! Well, my old man has integrity too, but he would never let it stand in the way of this kind of relationship because that is the most important thing. That's biologically based. So then when I saw these notes I thought, gee what am I quoting here, and I wasn't quoting anything.

Elder: And those go back to the 60s, don't they?

Bronfenbrenner: They go back to the 60s, but some of them I threw away; it was just too much paper. Some of it was in my handwriting, and you couldn't read it!

Elder: Because you have two worlds of childhood and then you begin to see the ecology of human development emerging.

Bronfenbrenner: That's right.

Elder: In '76, I think you had the <u>American Psychologist</u> piece.

Bronfenbrenner: You got exactly what was happening, and if you think I knew it was happening--but I did say in the one piece, I don't know whether it got published or not. It was an SRCD address that I gave in which I said, in effect, "I was wrong in the ecology of human development, I left out--"

Elder: The organism.

Bronfenbrenner: Yes, the organism. And, of course, the organism is then the thing from which the irrational stuff comes, and so I was playing the same strategy unconsciously that I am now playing consciously. Start with the unemotional, get that to the point where people say, "Hey, this is interesting and useful," and I'd say, "Yes, but that's not worthy." And who helped me see that was Gary. He said, "Why do you separate--"

Elder: We need to identify Gary on the tape.

Bronfenbrenner: Gary Evans. He's the young man whom I'm teaching with.

Elder: He's in the Department of Environmental Science is he?

Bronfenbrenner: Yes. He objected to the fact that I was equating PPCT with the bio-ecological mind. He said, "PPCT is separate from the bio-ecological mind; you shouldn't define the dialog as being PPCT. What you need to do is to say that it is a map," and I finally recalled, you know, taxonomy and what's there. He said, "The beauty of that is that you can use it for any model, and you can say what's there for this theoretical model, and that's very helpful." Get it out of equating it with this particular model, and he is very good and he catches me in things that are inconsistent because--

Elder: He's coming to it new.

Bronfenbrenner: He's coming to it new. "And one thing that will be of interest to you and our thinking together," he said to me, "we have separate definitions now. How do you distinguish at the PPCT level, and how do you distinguish at the theoretical model level, and to what extent are there different rules for the two? To what extent do they overlap, because they do overlap?" He was giving me that--that they overlap but differently. "So how do you distinguish whether something is present in the PPCT model?" Answer was, and it was a very easy answer, "it has to vary systematically. It has to vary in ways that you can distinguish what the variances are. All of these things are in the model."

He asked, "For example, variation in this and that, does it rule things out?" And I said, "No. This is science, and in science you prove yourself wrong. You have to have it in a form in which you can prove yourself wrong. If it exists in nature, the next question is can you put it into a form in which these things can be distinguished and not overlapping, and all that." So then we get to this situation of the bio-ecological model, and we are doing a study in which you have: it's longitudinal. And not only that, it's longitudinal on all the elements, and the question is, is it included in the bio-ecological model? Is it included even in the PPCT model? His answer is no. I said, "What do you mean, it's just a longitudinal study. Nothing is varied systematically? That is, you're taking this measurement here, you're taking the measurement here and you're calling it as we did, not macro time but meso time, but you're not varying things." He replied, "It's not an element in the theoretical model, it's not even an element in the other model." I said, "Gee whiz, you're right," and I just wrote him an e-mail saying 'you are right.'

But I said, "It's very important that we have this," which he is now resisting. Why? Because all of our definitions--this is not a model of theoretical model behavior, it's a model of development. You have to show whether things change over time, and we have said that it's a characteristic of a person if it extends across space and time for a significant segment of the life course. Well, how are you going to tell that? You have to have a longitudinal one. So this is what I am doing now with him because he is new, but mostly because he is very sharp and thoughtful and wants to learn. It's a very exciting experience because he sort of says, "Hey, you didn't touch base, you know." I said, "Gee whiz, I forgot to touch base!"

Elder: So between doing this book, Two Worlds of Childhood, you became a Belding Scholar and you were working with a number of people, Mel Kohn and this is the Foundation of Child Development.

Bronfenbrenner: This is where I first met the Foundation of Child Development.

Elder: Brought a group of people together and--

Bronfenbrenner: Bert Brim.

Elder: Bert Brim did.

Bronfenbrenner: Bert Brim. And he never forgave me for the fact that I wouldn't hold seminars of training for people, which is what he intended me to do. He wanted that to be, and I felt very guilty, but I said I have other things I have to do, and there are other things that I have to contribute. He was man enough to say because he was even charging me with having misused, or not fulfilled, the purpose of the grant.

Elder: But you had your running seminar, didn't you?

Bronfenbrenner: Oh yes, for a while, but he wanted me then to give seminars at the major universities. It would be a kind of extended training program coming out of FCD and I couldn't do that, write part two.

Elder: So you did this paper for the American Psychologist, which really for the first time brought some of these elements together.

Bronfenbrenner: Exactly. And it was beyond everything; it was a new thing.

Elder: Then your book came out in 1979, The Ecology of Human Development, which really fleshed that out in great detail.

Bronfenbrenner: No, I would say what happened with The Ecology of Human Development is it fleshed some things out, but it still involves micro/meso--

Elder: That's what it was, a taxonomy.

Bronfenbrenner: It was a taxonomy and the notion of what is now called the bio-ecological model was not yet there.

Elder: No.

Bronfenbrenner: It was not yet there; it was a taxonomy. As I now worked the seminar, another interesting thing about this--

Elder: The period right after The Ecology of Human Development was published represented something of a transition as I look at it. I wanted to know how you saw this period in your own scientific development.

Bronfenbrenner: Well, partly because, as you know, we have been in each other's head for some time; you are quite correct in that. And it is a different period in my thinking, both in terms of theory, but it's primarily sparked by policy because what I began seeing at that period were changes in American

society that were in many ways beginning to lead both the developed and the developing world, which I did summarize in terms of the phrase: a growing chaos in the lives of children, youths, families through the life course and across generations. I saw evidence of this--enough so that I really, in fact, at the suggestion of my colleagues who were responding to my concerns--that we need to document that. And we did publish a volume in which we documented the change.

But having done that, it became clear to me that the problem was a lot of people were seeing this change because it was hitting human beings in their daily lives, but we as scientists were not proving anything, so what do you do? And as a result I decided that the task for me, given my interests, is primarily to try to develop theoretical models that could deal with or enable us to understand what these forces of disarray were with corresponding research designs that would not only document what the processes were but would address the question of how those processes could be used in a constructive way, both of constrain, and to redirect and to reverse the process of growing chaos.

It had special significance for me in that my own country for which, as we discussed earlier, I feel a great debt on behalf of my preceding generation and the new generation that are now my children and my grandchildren, that this was something that was my obligation to do the best I could. So I have been wrestling with that, and there are recent publications, as you know, that tried to deal with that. And this is a question of, what are the processes both of stabilization so that the chaos doesn't continue, and what are the processes that move the developmental growth of competence and decrease the psychological disarray that we are now creating, as documented in this volume on documented changes. The one thing I can say is we are now at the point, just as my friend and colleague, Glen Elder, said of doing some things that we couldn't do before. That applies here as we now have the theoretical basis and we have the capacities of making them concrete in terms of corresponding research designs. We can begin to develop an understanding of these courses and begin to develop strategies so that they are working in-line with the potentials of this particular biological species with it's very different biological characteristics and capacities, which are extraordinary both in their capacities for increasing the humanness of human beings, but also for decreasing their chaos. These are concrete possibilities. We can begin to do them now, and I see that as the main task and the promise of progress in the future.

Those who inspired and were influenced by Urie Bronfenbrenner:

Mentors
Leon Tolstoy
Fritz Riedel
Kurt Lewin
Frank Freeman
Bert Brim

Colleagues
Henry Murray
Gary Evans
John Clausen
Mel Kohn
Glen Elder