In Appreciation: Urie Bronfenbrenner

October 24, 2005

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a co-founder of the national Head Start program and widely regarded as one of the world's leading scholars in developmental psychology, child-rearing and human ecology — the interdisciplinary domain he created — died September 25, 2005. He was 88.

At his death, Bronfenbrenner was the Jacob Gould Schurman Professor Emeritus of Human Development and of psychology at Cornell University, where he spent most of his professional career. Bronfenbrenner's ideas and his ability to translate them into operational research models and effective social policies spurred the creation in 1965 of Head Start. In 1979 Bronfenbrenner further developed his thinking into the groundbreaking theory on the ecology of human development.

Researchers say that before Bronfenbrenner, child psychologists studied the child, sociologists examined the family, anthropologists the society, economists the economic framework of the times and political scientists the structure. As the result of Bronfenbrenner's groundbreaking concept of the ecology of human development, these environments — from the family to economic and political structures — were viewed as part of the life course, embracing both childhood and adulthood.

Bronfenbrenner's "bioecological" approach to human development shattered barriers among the social sciences and forged bridges among the disciplines that have allowed findings to emerge about which key elements in the larger social structure and across societies are vital for developing the potential of human nature.

Bronfenbrenner was well-known for his cross-cultural studies on families and their support systems and on human development and the status of children. He was the author, co-author or editor of more than 300 articles and chapters and 14 books, most notably "Two Worlds of Childhood: US and USSR," "The State of Americans," *The Ecology of Human Development* and "Making Human Beings Human." His writings were widely translated, and his students and colleagues number among today's most internationally influential developmental psychologists.

From the very beginning of his scholarly work, Bronfenbrenner pursued three mutually reinforcing themes: developing theory and corresponding research designs at the frontiers of developmental science; laying out the implications and applications of developmental theory and research for policy and practice; and communicating — through articles, lectures and discussions — the findings of developmental research to undergraduate students, the general public and to decision-makers.

His widely published contributions won him honors and awards both at home and abroad. He held many honorary doctoral degrees, several of them from leading European universities. His most recent American award (1996), now given annually in his name, is for "Lifetime Contribution to Developmental Psychology in the Service of Science and Society" from the American Psychological Association, known as "The Bronfenbrenner Award."

Born in Moscow in 1917, Bronfenbrenner came to the United States at the age of 6. He received a bachelor's degree from Cornell in 1938, completing a double major in psychology and music. He went on to graduate work in developmental psychology, completing a master's degree at Harvard University followed by a PhD from the University of Michigan in 1942. The day after receiving his doctorate he was inducted into the Army, where he served as a psychologist in a variety of assignments in the Air Corps and the Office of Strategic Services. After completing officer training, he served in the US Army Medical Corps. Following demobilization and a two-year stint as an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, he joined the Cornell faculty in 1948, where he remained for the rest of his professional life.

In addition to his wife, Liese, he is survived by six children, including Kate, who is the director of labor education research at Cornell, and 13 grandchildren and a great-granddaughter.

Prepared by Susan S. Lang, Cornell University News Service.

Family Champion, Policy Advisor, and Friend

Urie Bronfenbrenner's contributions won him major awards, honorary doctorates around the world, and the ardent following of a generation of social scientists. His 1979 book, *The Ecology of Human Development* was hailed as groundbreaking, establishing his place at the forefront of the field; his ecological theory, and his ability to translate it into operational research models and effective social policies, led to the creation of federal programs for low-income children and their families. His theoretical model transformed the way many social and behavioral scientists approached the study of human beings and their environments and shattered barriers among the social sciences and forged bridges across the disciplines. In recognition of this, in 1993 he was a recipient of the APS James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award.

In view of his numerous contributions, it is odd that none of them came to mind upon learning of Urie's death. When his daughter, Kate, informed me that her father had passed away, an assault of unsorted reminiscences of him flooded into my consciousness – none of which concerned his groundbreaking research, his landmark treatises, or many well-deserved accolades. Instead, the images I summoned were memories of Urie, the person. But they said a great deal about Urie, the scholar and policymaker. I counted myself as one of the privileged few who worked very closely with Urie; we co-wrote a book, four journal articles, including his 1994 Psychological Review treatise, and numerous chapters in edited volumes. We co-taught three or four times, co-wrote a grant, and gave three joint addresses at conventions. We were in each other's lives for over 20 years. It was the personal moments that revealed the generous, decent, open-minded, and caring friend that came to mind when I learned of his passing. The man never was too busy or self-important to offer to collect me at the airport or to bring me soup when I was ill.

When Kate told me of her father's death, the first image I recalled was of a young woman entering Urie's office, flanked by two clowns. It must have been around 1990, give or take a couple years. I was curious about these clowns — who were they and why were they entering Urie's office — so later I called Urie to ask about them. He said the young woman was a former undergraduate who was now a Madison Avenue marketing executive who handled the McDonald's account. As an undergraduate, she had the

privilege of hearing him lecture in his mythical course in developmental psychology, along with 700-800 others. For Urie, nothing was more important than his students, and he always had an open door policy for present and past ones. He was famous (rightly so) for refusing to take calls from important people if he was meeting with a student when the call came.

The marketing executive with the clowns asked Urie to watch a new ad campaign: It was called the *Hamburglar*: Boys wearing Sherlock Holmes attire and carrying magnifying glasses, searched for clues to the missing hamburger. It ends with the boys finding the thief, an old woman crouched in the corner with her largess, the missing burger. The successful sleuthing was cheered by onlooking girls.

When asked what he thought of the ad, Urie said it was the wrong message: all of the sleuths were boys, all of the girls were cheerleaders, a hungry old woman was depicted as a thief, etc. He really did not like this ad! The marketing executive asked Urie what he recommended, and without missing a beat he told her "Your theme should be *McDonald's is a family place, a place where families enjoy themselves over a meal*." She apparently did not like this idea, and explained that McDonald's is a fast food chain and many of its stores do not have tables and chairs for families. She must have sensed that Urie did not know much about McDonald's, because she asked him, "Professor, have you ever been in a McDonald's?" He said he had not. But Urie told me that he nevertheless told her that the family was America's strength and he repeated that her theme should be *McDonald's is a family place*.

Urie Bronfenbrenner plays with children attending Cornell's Early Childhood Center.

One evening many months later, Urie called me at home to report that the marketing executive called to ask him to watch a local channel at 8 pm. She said he would like what he saw. And he did. It was an ad that showed families of all colors and ages sitting at tables and enjoying themselves in McDonalds. The theme was *McDonald's is a family place!* (By the way, the two clowns were prototypes for a new Ronald McDonald, and the executive wanted Urie to choose the one he preferred. He thought they both looked lovely.)

The second image that flooded into memory was of a rainy Columbus Day in the mid-1980s. Urie and I were invited to present our research proposal to a foundation's board of trustees. We met over breakfast to plan what we would say. It was a dreary day with heavy downpours so we were both clad in raincoats.

Our meeting was a success and the foundation decided to fund our proposal. As we walked down the street, we were congratulating each other and replaying the various issues, I realized something was amiss, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Then it dawned on me: Urie was wearing a raincoat that was at least six sizes too small for him. The sleeves ended midway between his elbows and wrists, the hem barely made it to his waist, and it was so tight that he was hunched over like Quasimodo.

I exclaimed: Urie, you're wearing a child's raincoat! At first, he insisted that it was his raincoat. But I was equally insistent, and so finally he asked me to peek inside the back collar and see if his wife, Liese, had inscribed his name there. I remember telling him that there was no name, only the manufacturer's label. Urie was dashed, and feared that Liese would take him to task for losing another item of clothing, which was why she put his name in his raincoat in the first place. To make a long story brief, we walked back to the foundation and found his raincoat still in the closet. He had inadvertently put on the raincoat

of the secretary's 8-yr-old son who was off school for Columbus Day, playing in his mother's office.

I cannot say why these two images came to me upon hearing of Urie's death, rather than one of the many images I have of doing research with him or watching him receive one of his awards. But these images capture the essence of Urie for me. He could be humbly arrogant, advising people on popular culture, matters he sometimes knew little about. But Urie knew America; and he knew it as only an outsider can know a place. He recognized the signs of its disarray and chaos, and he knew that its salvation would depend on strong families. As the research piled up showing the family's importance, this became Urie's mantra. He spent many of his later years warning that the processes that make human beings human were breaking down as disruptive trends in American society produce ever more chaos in the lives of America's families and children. "The hectic pace of modern life poses a threat to our children second only to poverty and unemployment," he said. "We are depriving millions of children – and thereby our country – of their birthright … virtues, such as honesty, responsibility, integrity, and compassion."

For someone so orthogonal to popular culture (he rarely watched commercial television and in 1994 was presented a plaque by "someone in the entertainment industry whose name I forget" — it was presented by Bill Cosby and his wife Camille!), he left his imprint on it, from co-creating the national Head Start program, to advising US presidents and vice presidents on domestic policies, to lecturing to CEOs and marketing executives about the American family's needs. He may not have reflected his times but he definitely helped shape them. His empty office stands as a reminder to me of the gap that he uniquely filled in research and policy as well as in my life.

— Stephen J. Ceci
Cornell University

The Most Unpretentious Scholar

When I was in my third year of graduate school at Cornell, during the mid-1970s, I once was in Urie's office discussing the draft of a paper we had been working on. The telephone rang, and Urie excused himself and took the call. He greeted the caller with his characteristic enthusiasm, and then promptly said, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to call you back. I'm meeting with a student." He then hung the phone up and turned back to me. "Walter Mondale," he said. "What a wonderful man." Urie then picked up just where our conversation had left off, as if nothing unusual had happened. He had just told the vice president of the United States that an appointment with a student took precedence over a phone conversation with him.

One did not need to have Urie as an advisor, committee member, or classroom instructor to be his student. If your work was interesting, Urie wanted to know more about it, and once he learned more about it, he could not help but suggest ways to improve it. He was the smartest, most generous, and most unpretentious scholar I have ever known, available to anyone who sought his advice, and, in fact, to many who didn't actively seek it but whom he could not help advising anyway. He thought nothing of contacting a perfect stranger to compliment a piece of work he had read that morning and at the same time to gently suggest a few things that could be done to make it better.

Urie's style of mentoring was unusual. True to his own theories of human development, Urie taught through the collaborative relationship he formed with his students, rather than through explicit instruction. He was a master at teaching people without making them feel as if they were being taught, an expert at what psychologists call "scaffolding," the art of challenging someone enough to make the person stretch but not so much that he or she might fail. As a result, even when Urie was critical of your work, somehow you left a meeting with him feeling more competent, more excited, and more interested in what you were studying than you had been previously.

At the university where I now work, we are asked at the end of each semester to complete a form indicating the way in which we had allocated our time across the categories of research, teaching, and service. I smile when I try to imagine Urie filling out such a form, engaging in what he surely would have seen as a silly and pointless exercise. For him, research, teaching, and service were all one and the same thing. Teaching was not something that had a beginning and an end. It was a way of living.

Not long ago, I had to end a phone conversation with him in order to go teach a class. "Ah, doing God's work," he said, when I explained why I needed to get off the phone. He wasn't joking or kidding. He really meant it.

— Laurence Steinberg
Temple University

1993 James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award Citation

Urie Bronfenbrenner is the embodiment of all that a great scientist ought to be. In his half century as a psychologist, Urie has been unequalled in his theoretical contributions and his ability to translate them into rigorous operational research models. Focusing on the interaction processes between the organism and its environment, his books and articles have been widely translated, and his students and colleagues number among the most influential developmental psychologists today not only in this country but abroad. His imprint on the field of developmental psychology will be felt for generations to come.

Urie is that rare breed of scientist-citizen, motivated and able to employ rigorous developmental science to analyze critical societal problems, and to apply what has been learned for designing social programs and strategies that can foster the well-being and psychological development of children, youth, and adults.

To end at the beginning, Urie's life work in psychology has illustrated the truth of that oft-quoted aphorism of his later extracurricular mentor, Kurt Lewin, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory."

Urie Was a Phenomenon

Urie Bronfenbrenner was my advisor and mentor. His support and guidance helped me complete my human development PhD in 1973. But our relationship began much earlier and went much deeper, and it is Urie the person as much as Urie the activist scholar I salute, in all his complexity.

My life became intertwined with Urie's 40 years ago when he and some of his family came to a Unitarian Church camp in upstate New York where I worked as a counselor. It was Family Week, and Urie was there to serve as a resource leader for the adults' discussions on "the American family." Volleyball was the official camp game, and Urie took to it with his characteristic gusto and eagerness, fueled, no doubt by the fact that we encouraged intergenerational games. Urie was so enthusiastic that he set up a volleyball court in the yard of his home and for years to come invited students, colleagues, and neighbors to play.

Being Urie's student was a many-splendored thing. He was an extraordinary mentor for me in every possible way. *Two Worlds of Childhood* had just come out and was a major success. Head Start was underway and Urie was in the thick of things academically and publicly. I vividly recall one afternoon sitting in his office talking as our conversation was repeatedly interrupted by telephone calls—from Germany, Moscow, and Washington, DC. I sat there in awe to be at the vortex of so much academic and public policy action—and in three languages no less! At the end of the session he said to me, "Isn't it amazing they pay us to do this, this wonderful exciting work!" But then he turned to me with a grave look on his face and added, "But don't you ever forget that it is an enormous responsibility that comes with it." And I haven't.

Urie was a phenomenon. So at home in the exalted company of scholars and the politically connected, he sometimes had an almost child-like enthusiasm and naiveté about "real life." When they installed new vending machines in the cafeteria in our building at Cornell, Urie stood before them as perplexed as an aboriginal bushman confronted with modern technology. At the height of Green Bay Packer's Coach Vince Lombardi's fame a colleague at a meeting once said, "that's another example of 'the Vince Lombardi Ethic' " to which Urie was heard to ask the person next to him. "Lombardi? Is he at Yale?" I recall him going home early for a period of weeks to watch the early version of *Sesame Street* on assignment for *Psychology Today*; this being Urie he was a stranger to television. Nonetheless, his critique of the pace and values exhibited by the program led to changes in format and content.

Urie could be infuriating in his own charming way. On one occasion a first-year graduate student came to me in distress that Urie had sent her to look for a reference and she could not find it anywhere. I recalled that earlier that year in a seminar Urie had begun to describe a study that should be done and even went on to describe how he thought it would turn out. By spring, he was speaking as if it had been done and now had sent this poor student to look for the reference. I might add that eventually such a study was done, and that it turned out just as Urie had predicted.

I returned to Cornell as a faculty member in 1994 in large part to honor Urie's contribution to my life. I last saw Urie, in September 2004, when I slipped into his hospital-style room unannounced and unaccompanied. By then he was a nice old man who did not recognize me. We held hands as I cried and told him the story of our relationship over the decades since we met on the volleyball court.

Urie had a grasp of human ecology that dazzled anyone who had the opportunity to glimpse what he saw. He was an intellectual giant as the public record shows. But he was splendidly human as well.

— **Jim Garbarino**
Loyola University Chicago