“My First Mister”
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Uri Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model
Biosocial Development
Cognitive Development
Psychosocial Development

Uri Bronfenbrenner was a psychologist who was interested in the well being of children and people around the world. He studied their surroundings and environment, paying particular attention to the psychosomatic development of people. Bronfenbrenner developed an intricate system in which he could evaluate the quality of a person’s life thus giving him a foundation for a person’s attributes. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model encompasses five systems that influence a person’s development beginning with their closest contacts as newborns to the history that they were not directly involved in. The five components consist of the microsystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem and finally the interaction of two or more systems creating the fifth system called the mesosystem. Each system’s influence is propelled typically by human association. This human association begins as an infant. As a baby grows, he/she begins to delve in the outer layers of the Ecological Model. The realization of the Ecological Model is that as an individual matures, he or she is constantly evolving and at the same time retaining characteristics unique to that individual.

By using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model, we can examine an individual’s life span. We can attribute normalcy or maladjustment to the influence of one or more of the five systems of the Uri Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System. The main character in the movie My First Mister is a seventeen year old female that is clearly in the depths of adolescence. Jennifer has normal issues for her age, but she also has deeply embedded emotional issues. The Ecological Model can help unfold the basis for Jennifer’s profound behavior as well as her profound changes.

The inner component of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model is the microsystem. It involves a person’s immediate family and surroundings. Jennifer’s microsystem was weak and terribly flawed or one could say nonexistent. Her parents were divorced. She did not have a relationship with her father or stepfather. She did not even like her own mother. And more importantly, Jennifer did not have friends or any relationships to speak of. She had no one to talk to except her cat. She was her own microsystem!

This lack of a microsystem could have a substantial impact on a person’s behavior and could have attributed to Jennifer’s bizarre appearance. Individuals use their microsystem to help them establish the underpinning for future relationships. In addition, social learning theory tells us self efficacy is associated with ambition and achievements; developmental aspects which Jennifer clearly lacked. People gain these qualities by interpreting and perceiving what others think of them and vice versa. Another aspect of self efficacy that is relevant is modeling. Jennifer did not have good role models from which to acquire positive self esteem, warmth or reassurance.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System’s next “layer” encompasses one’s environment, the exosystem. The institutions which comprise this layer are: school, church, peers, and other such organizations. These social settings have a direct impact on our development, as well as our personality.

As we are getting acquainted with Jennifer’s personality, we get of peek of her relating to her very own exosystem… her classroom and peers. It is obvious that Jennifer is having a difficult time connecting to the teacher because she pictures him in her mind as a monster or
someone that is frightening to her. When he calls on her to give her report, she mumbles a few words and barely makes an effort to perform as a student should. Here we see that Jennifer’s exosystem is not functioning to her advantage. The people in her exosystem, as well as all the systems in the Ecological Model, should be the basis for support, but can work in the opposite direction. Schools and peers dictate what is normal or cool and what is not. More importantly, if you do not fit the criteria for “cool” you are considered an outcast. Jennifer undisputedly does not fit into the “in crowd.” Jennifer lacks sufficient social skills to form relationships with adults and with her peers. This “side effect” extends from not having a strong microsystem from which to build upon.

Another indication of Jennifer’s struggle to comprehend people is the use of binoculars. She uses them to look at peers in school and people in public places. Binoculars allow the viewer a close up look. She desperately wants to understand these human beings that surround her day to day and perhaps the use of binoculars allows her to get a closer look. Jennifer has a hard time “reading” people. Perhaps this is due to her mother who seemed to be so unusually happy all the time. Her mother did not have but one mood, happy. Children use social referencing to understand the feelings of others. Jennifer grew up with a parent that had only one mood reaction to all situations; thus, giving Jennifer a very difficult time understanding people.

Jennifer graduates from high school and begins to look for work. She does not pursue a college education. We can predict that Jennifer’s cognitive development was not on track, making academic achievement difficult. Age appropriate cognitive development would stem from proper stimulation from the parents at an early age. We have already established that Jennifer had a very weak microsystem and her exosystem was not supportive as well.

In Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model, the macrosystem consist of influences in society such as political philosophy, social conditions, and cultural values. Jennifer’s clothes are gothic, she wears black make-up, and her piercings are repulsive to those around her. People look at her with disgust and fear. Furthermore, the standards set by society regarding proper clothing and overall appearances are the same standards that exist in a school’s mini society. This would encompass components from two systems: the exosystem and the macrosystem therefore creating Jennifer’s mesosystem.

We start to see a transition period in Jennifer’s adolescent life when she finds employment in a men’s clothing store. The owner, Randall, is possibly the closest thing to a decent man or father figure that she has known, hence the title My First Mister. Moreover, Randall is a good example of a clean cut, normal looking man; the antithesis of Jennifer’s appearance. She may admire his characteristics because they are the exact ones she is lacking. It’s difficult to know exactly why these two people formed a bond.

Later, we learn that Randall has just as many “hang-ups” as Jennifer; they are just not as observable as Jennifer’s. They are a lot alike in that both of them have trouble forming relationships. Randall has phobias, such as fear of flying or riding in boats. He seldom takes risks, while Jennifer thrives on taking risk. By the end of the movie, the characters seem to have absorbed the “good” characteristics from one another.

The psychosocial aspect of Jennifer’s development starts to appear as she yearns to find an identity for herself. The identity crisis is evident in that she refers to herself as “J.” Moreover, her way of dressing could be attributed to negative identity. It is completely opposite of what her mother and society expect. Negative identity is an identity that is taken on with rebellious defiance, simply because it is the opposite of whatever parents or society expects (p. 388).

Although Jennifer displays countless characteristics of a confused adolescent, the most significant detrimental behavior is self-mutilation. Self-mutilation is a sign of internalizing emotional problems. The only time the viewer witnesses this behavior is when Jennifer finds out that the man she loves and has become desperately attached to is dying. The pain is more than she can endure.
Perhaps by inflicting a more intense pain, Jennifer is not able to feel the pain coming from her heart and soul. Once again, I am led back to Jennifer’s microsystem. As a child, she may not have been given the tools needed to deal with emotional pain. We can infer that her mother did not meet the needs of her very own developing child. Possibly Jennifer experienced some developmental issues in her early childhood; being insecurely or avoidantly attached with her mother during the time of her parent’s divorce.

Such issues are reflected in how the mother interacts with or responds to her child. Jennifer’s insecure personality fits the category of being insecure avoidant. This refers to a pattern of attachment in which one person tries to avoid any connection with another, as an infant who is uninterested in the caregiver’s presence or departure and ignores the caregiver on reunion (p. 182). Of course, Jennifer is not an infant. But, researchers are now providing results from studies in which attachment models developed in early childhood are shown to impact with later development and are consistent with Jennifer’s bizarre behavior in adolescence.

Bronfenbrenner’s chronosystem stresses the impact of the past on present development. Jennifer had someone from her past that had an incredible impact on her as an adolescent. Her grandmother recently died perhaps leaving Jennifer with no emotional support. Furthermore, we don’t know Jennifer’s behavior was like when her grandmother was alive. Possibly she was so distraught by her grandmother’s death, she turned to body piercing and gothic clothes.

The timing of life events in the course of Jennifer’s development is also a factor in looking at the chronosystem’s impact. The grandmother continued to influence Jennifer even after her death. One of the first times we witness Jennifer’s soft side is when she speaks about her grandmother. Hence, we see that the grandmother brought out the more positive and softer sides of Jennifer’s life.

Another important aspect of human development is the epigenetic factor. Epigenetic theory states that psychosocial development is influenced by traits that a person is genetically predisposed to develop (p. 174). About two thirds of the way through My First Mister, we meet Jennifer’s dad. He is just as enthralled with the taboos that society rejected him for as Jennifer is enthralled with the taboos of her current situation.

They both display behavior that could be considered socially inappropriate. It is possible that since Jennifer inherited her father’s genes, she inherited a genetic factor that may make it difficult for them to establish their identity, or rather, the similarity in the development of a negative identity between the two of them. This genetic inheritance could be associated with Bronfenbrenner’s chronosystem components. After all, genes are passed from generation to generation and can be associated with our history.

Uri Bronfenbrenner gave us this extraordinary scientific method to use in assessing people’s development as well as their progressions in life. However, we can take this assessment one step further and do an overall summary by applying the concept of developmental cogwheeling. Developmental Cogwheeling is the progression in maturation across the domains of Cognition, Psychosocial, and Biosocial at roughly the same pace. If one domain falls behind or advances too quickly beyond the others, it often results in developmental difficulties.

In looking at the character of Jennifer in My First Mister, one can see and hear that she is developing normally in the biosocial area. Her thoughts are up to par for a seventeen year old female teenager. She has surpassed the onset of puberty. In addition, she has begun sexual fantasies. As the viewer is allowed to hear her thoughts, we can detect Jennifer’s biosocial development. Jennifer seems to be consumed with sex and her body. She fantasizes about having a relationship with a man and what it would be like to have a man touch her. She even admits to the sexual experiences that she has already encountered as well as the ones she hopes to encounter.

However, other areas of Jennifer’s development are not on target for a seventeen year old. Her psychosocial development is not what one would consider normal. She is having identity problems, she is not developing relationships with her peers, and the only relationship she
does have is with a 49 year old man. Furthermore, she is indulging in self mutilation, an indication that something is very seriously wrong with her emotionally. Other evidence of unrest is Jennifer participating in rituals such as lying on top of people’s grave to receive energy from the dead people, as well as the enjoyment she gets in writing poetic eulogies.

Jennifer’s cognitive development may not be on target as well; however it is difficult to know because we don’t see much of this side of her development. We know from one scene in the movie she did not perform well at school, probably due to her social status and negative identity. Her job at the store was a stock person which didn’t require much intellect, but she is able to provide order and structure to the stock room.

Other evidence of Jennifer’s inadequate cognitive development could be noted in the self efficacy factor. A person’s thought processes help them to interpret the world around them. In turn, the thought process helps one to develop attitudes, beliefs, values, assumptions and behaviors. All of these traits seem to be out of kilter when it comes to Jennifer.

Towards the second half of the movie, we see Jennifer transitioning from this abnormal, weird teenager to a caring, thoughtful, young women and even a dinner party hostess! By now she is not wearing black make-up, piercings, or gothic clothes. She is forming a caring, loving relationship with her mother.

This change is incredible! The only difference in Jennifer’s life that is obvious is Randall. He got the wheels of cognition rolling and the psychosocial neurons firing in Jennifer. Knowing the difference he made, helps the viewer sympathize with Jennifer’s sorrow over losing the best thing that every happened to her.

At the beginning of the movie, Jennifer was not developmentally cogwheeling; however by the end of the movie, her psychosocial, biosocial, and cognitive development levels seem to be more synchronized.

In my opinion no one can cogwheel perfectly throughout adolescence or for that matter….life because there is no such thing as the perfect person. Each area of development waxes and wanes, but for the most part they should stay within adequate range to retain a socially and cognitively acceptable individual.

Work Cited