

## Handout

### **Understanding Children in Context: The Ecological Model of Human Development**

Socialization always occurs in a context and any specific context is embedded in a web of other and ever-changing contexts. There is no such thing as a decontextualized child. To study “the child” without understanding the context is to not fully understand all of the factors that affect the child. This text, *The Young Child in the Family and the Community*, is about the socialization of the child in context. Simply put, the child is studied in the context of developmental theory, which comes in the context of family, which lies in the context of community. All of these contexts can be thought of environments or settings that hold people, which influence each other and are influenced by culture. This organization falls in line with the model that Urie Bronfenbrenner laid out for us in 1979<sup>1</sup> and continued to work on. He said that there are layers of context – even more specifically, he referred to a set of Russian dolls which are nested inside each other, the smallest one at the core. The organization of the book relates to Bronfenbrenner’s layers. They may have different names; nevertheless, all the components of Bronfenbrenner’s model are here in this text. Simply put, what Bronfenbrenner called an *ecological model of human development* means that any child is at the center of what can be visualized as concentric circles of context set in an overarching system of time, which affects all the contexts and continually changes them. (See a depiction of his model on the next page.)

#### **The Parts of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model**

The **microsystems** layer, the smallest of the contexts in which the child is embedded, is made up of the environment where the child lives and moves. The people and institutions the child interacts within that environment make up the microsystem. Examples are immediate family members, childcare and school teachers and peers, and perhaps neighborhood play area, depending on the age of the child; school, and religious institutions or spiritual groups may be part of the system. The younger the child, the smaller the number of microsystems. The microsystems are set in the mesosystems layer.

The **mesosystems** layer relates to the interactions the people in the microsystems have with each other – as parents interact with childcare providers, or as neighbors interact with each other, for example. The child is not directly involved with the mesosystems, but nevertheless is affected by them.

The **exosystems** layer is a wider context as it relates to the broader community in which the child lives. Examples of what is in the exosystems layer are extended family, family networks, mass media, workplaces, neighbors, family friends, community health systems, legal services, social welfare services. Though the child may not have direct contact with it, the systems affect the child’s development and socialization – as do all the systems. Because the people in the child’s life are affected by the exosystems and mesosystems,

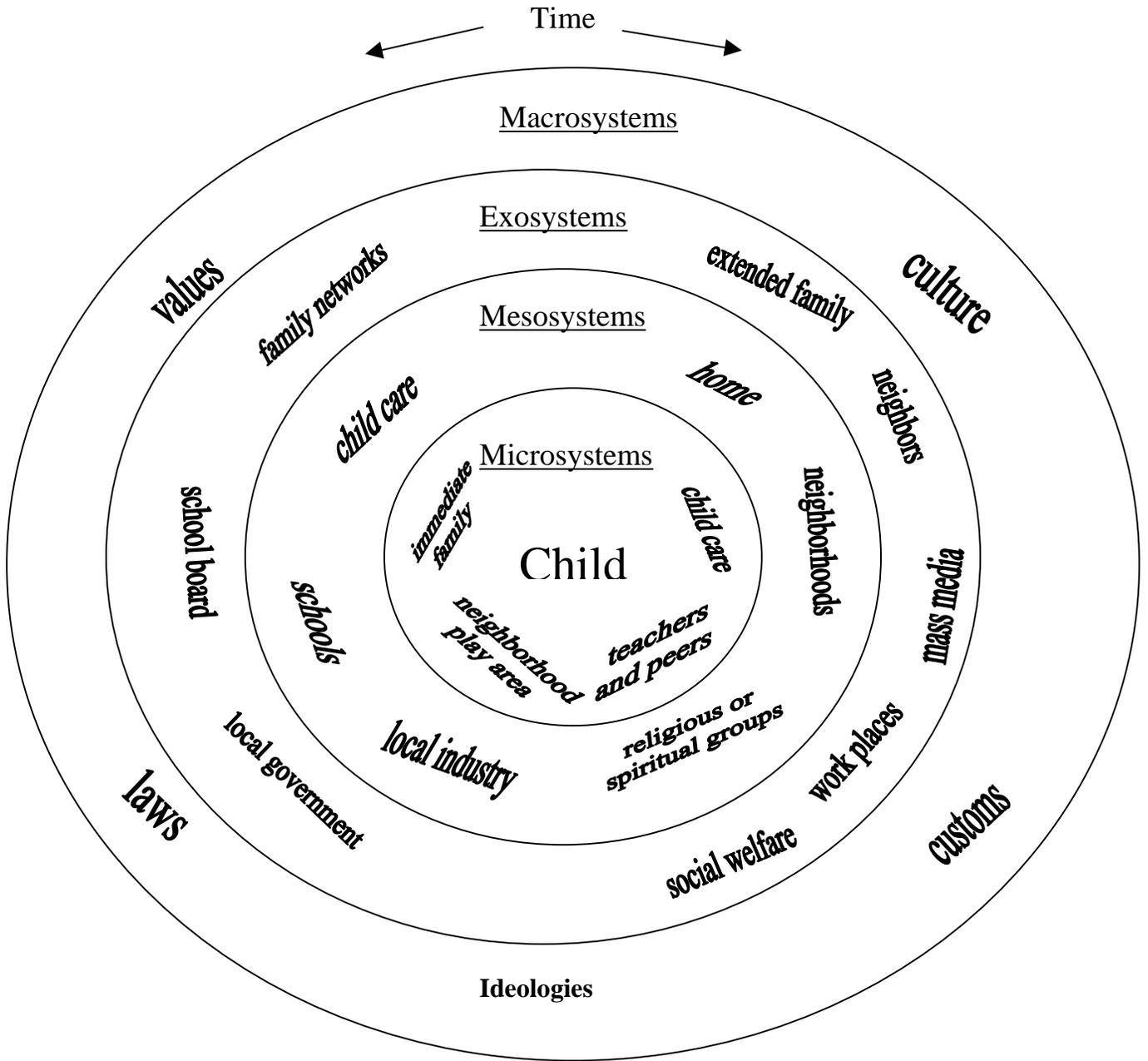
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<sup>1</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

the child is also. An example of how the exosystems affect the child shows up when a parent goes to work or gets laid off from work. The changes in the parent's life impact the child's life.

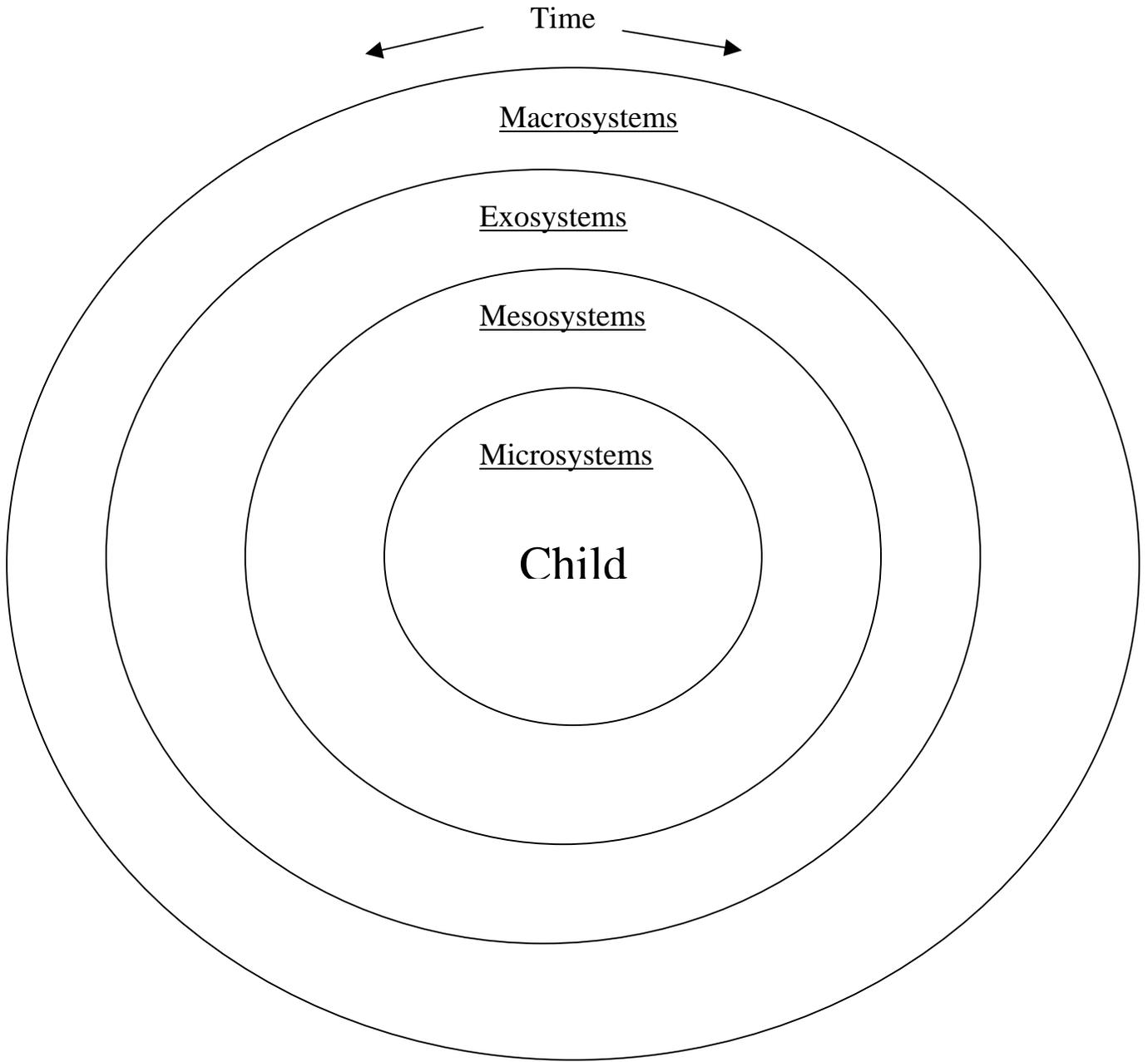
The outer layer, called the **macrosystems**, contains the attitudes and ideologies, values, laws and customs of a particular culture or subculture.

The point of the ecological model is that each component interacts with other components, making a highly complex context the child grows up in. Another point is that the child isn't just a passive recipient of what goes on in his or her life. The child at the center of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model interacts directly with the people in the microsystems and the effects of the interaction go both ways. As people affect the child, so the child has an influence on them. Another point is that nothing ever remains static. As a result, the child, systems, and environments are ever changing. Milestones and life events occur as time passes, the child grows, and the contexts change.



Urie Bronfenbrenner's

Ecological Theory of Human Development



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