

Homo Interpretans: On the Relevance of Perspectives, Knowledge, and Beliefs in the Ecology of Human Development

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This chapter is an attempt to pay tribute to Urie Bronfenbrenner and to his program for a general ecology of human development as a fascinating and powerful intellectual achievement. It was my good fortune, in the late 1960s, that Urie served as my mentor, introducing me to American social science. This relationship soon developed into a friendship. Over the years, I came to appreciate his outstanding talents for interpreting the work and texts of others, as well as his own earlier writings. My experiences are a testimony, on a personal level, to the importance of Urie Bronfenbrenner's influence on what has emerged, over the years, as a major theoretical interest in my own work, namely, the appropriate assessment of "the act called interpretation" (to paraphrase the title of an arti-

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For a more elaborated attempt to follow Urie Bronfenbrenner's intellectual pathways into the "Ecology of Human Development," see my introduction, "Urie Bronfenbrenners Weg zur ökologischen Sozialisationsforschung" [Urie Bronfenbrenner's Path Toward Ecological Socialization] in Bronfenbrenner (1976, pp. 6–32).

cle by Abel, 1948). I am referring to its role in everyday life, for example, the ways in which people assess and understand each other in their environments, and to the role of interpretations in research and their epistemological qualities.

On this occasion, I focus my argument on the relevance of knowledge and beliefs for the study of socialization processes and their connections with the idea of proximal processes, which received special attention in Bronfenbrenner's recent writings (see this volume, chapter 19; Bronfenbrenner, 1993b).

Knowledge and beliefs occupy a central position in the processes of human development, because human beings, given their anthropological equipment, can and must develop a certain comprehension of the process of caring for their offspring. They can and must attribute certain meanings to their children's and their own behaviors and to the specificities of the relations between generations. In this way, behaviors become actions and relations become interactions.

Theories of socialization must account for this unique feature of human development. This holds true even if one attempts to focus on the biological roots of development. The notion of "proximal processes," as suggested by Bronfenbrenner, is meant particularly to clarify the interplay between the biological equipment and the immediate social situations that frame the interactions between a child and her or his closest caregivers, particularly the mother and father. I suggest that it would be fruitful to incorporate knowledge and beliefs into the conceptualization of proximal processes.

One may be reluctant to do so, because it seems impossible to establish causal links between knowledge and beliefs, on the one hand, and behaviors, on the other. It appears that the human ability to interpret facts and behaviors involves polysemy (e.g., the opportunities and the burdens of a plurality of meanings). However, it is just this potential for openness that gives rise to theoretical and empirical challenges.

To assess the human potential for openness, we may recall, first, the qualities of human communication, particularly of language. However, a more general conceptualization might refer to and elaborate the idea that

human action is perspectivistic. In ordinary language, the term *perspectivistic* indicates that we see and comprehend things from a certain point of view. In theory, a perspective can be conceived as the relation of a subject to the world of which he or she is a part. Consequently, in comprehending and expressing their experiences with their environments, with each other and with themselves, human beings—both as individuals and as species, that is, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically—develop notions of how they differ from one another. In becoming aware of the perspectivistic character of their orientations and their acts, and within the same cognitive operation, they may develop notions of their own personal identities (i.e., their self).

Simultaneously, these processes require a minimum of communality, which may be mediated by language and, furthermore, by a common stock of knowledge and beliefs. Processes of interpretation may, thus, be conceived of as ongoing dialogues, queries, and struggles over perspectives as to how socialization tasks may be solved or shaped by processes of influence and the exercise of power to maintain sociality within a family, a community, a state or—ultimately—human societies, that is, human ecologies.

In regard to socialization and with reference to Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development, I would like to focus here on two kinds of processes of interpretation: the elementary or primary interpretations of immediate actions that people make in concrete situations and the secondary interpretations experts and other observers offer in trying to analyze these actions. Both are to be seen as interwoven with each other and as influencing each other.

Primary interpretations concern micro-orientations of human conduct. They are bound to cognitions and language. They depend for their contents on *culture*, in the broad sense of this term. Secondary interpretations deliberately add an element of reflection, namely, of comparison, which, in turn, requires categorization, theorization, and institutionalization. Thus, the ordinary reasons a mother gives for satisfying most of her child's demands (primary interpretation) may be interpreted by experts as protection or overprotection (secondary interpretation). Furthermore,

a mother looking for advice may accept the views of experts and may thereby redefine her own understanding.

I said before that interpretations are bound to perspectives, which in turn may be conceived as identity-related theories. Indeed, the primary interpretations a mother uses may be seen as her own ideas and as a part of her personality. The interpretations of experts, although they may also be seen as having a subjective dimension, are more probably bound to a body of knowledge qualifying a theory, a discipline, a profession, or an organization. They are rooted in collective identities, for example, those of a discipline, such as psychology, or of a subdiscipline or a school of thought within a discipline. Experts' interpretations may also be based on religious or political convictions; they, too, may stand for collective identities. To make matters even more complex, the mother who accepts an expert's interpretation may—at least in part—identify herself as belonging to a group for which the expert's advice holds. This is easily understood if, for example, the expert is a rabbi, priest, or minister. In other cases, the expert's professional status may be less important for mothers, yet it is reasonable to think that it is still important for the expert, for instance, in his or her role as a professional social worker.

There is one final point that is basic to my argument. On one side, processes of interpretation are shaped by influences and power relations; on the other side, they may be genuinely new, that is, they are potentially innovative. This may be assumed for both primary and secondary processes of interpretation. On the microlevel, the close connection between power and interpretation is obvious in everyday interactions where those who exercise authority claim the right to "define the situation" for all persons involved. On the macrolevel, the law and its injunctions serve as strong mechanisms to impose certain forms of knowledge and to frame processes of interpretation. Yet these settings may also offer, deliberately or contingently, opportunities for new thoughts and actions to arise. The reason may be found in the conviction that all processes of interpretation are ultimately framed by the openness characterizing the evolution of the human mind, which is also the exploration of its boundaries.

Taking into account the special occasion that gave rise to this chap-

ter, I frame my argument by starting with some references to Urie Bronfenbrenner's personal and intellectual biography and by closing with a brief coda that takes up these topics again. Indeed, we may easily discover in his origins the roots of his sensitivity to the interplay between the individual and the qualities of his or her physical and social environments. Furthermore, already as a youngster, Bronfenbrenner was exposed simultaneously to two languages and two cultures; this may be the basis for his developing a fine feeling for the potential value of different orientations, perspectives, and identities, as well as for the necessity of interpreting them respectfully and with subtlety. His academic teachers and mentors undoubtedly reinforced these talents, and through the choice of his numerous colleagues, collaborators, and friends in many countries, Urie was able to create a personal ecology of great illumination, which merits its own place in the landscape of contemporary social science.

I begin with a reanalysis of Urie Bronfenbrenner's writings on knowledge and beliefs, relating them briefly to various other approaches. Before this background, however, I present my own propositions on the relevance of knowledge and beliefs, their connections to the idea of proximal processes, and their place within an interpretive, pragmatistic frame of reference for the study of human development.

THE INTELLECTUAL ECOLOGY OF A CREATIVE MIND

Urie Bronfenbrenner's cultural roots are located in European Russia, where he was born (1917 in Moscow), and in America, where he arrived as an immigrant with his family at the age of 6. In the autobiographical material included in the introduction to a German collection of his early articles, documenting the early period of the "ecology of human development" (see Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Lüscher, 1976), he fondly recalls his unique experiences as a child and adolescent in the very special niche of Letchworth Village (New York), where his father was employed as a research pathologist and clinician in a psychiatric hospital.

In Urie's formative years as a scholar, Frank Freeman, Fenno Dearborn, psychologists both, and Walter Ulich, a former minister of cultural affairs for Saxony and a humanist and philosopher, were important teachers and mentors, representing the two cultures of academia (science and the humanities), and perhaps already pointing toward the "third culture."

And there was, of course, Kurt Lewin, himself a European immigrant, a philosopher of science, researcher, and practitioner. We can well imagine that he deeply impressed the young Urie Bronfenbrenner, encouraging him to transcend the limits of what are now called established paradigms. Thus, we constantly find references in his writings to Lewin's call for a move from an Aristotelian notion of science toward a Galilean approach. In particular, taxonomic descriptions and linear causal inferences should be replaced by an analysis of the dynamic interplay between organisms (or persons) and their environments and the consequences of this interplay for the development of both. This idea is basic for Bronfenbrenner's models, which all display a triadic structure, most recently expressed in the terms *person-context-process*.¹

In retrospect, Lewin seems to be the source of Urie's fruitful discontent with developmental psychology in the experimental (strictly positivistic) mode. But it was a long time before he could state with conviction on the first pages of the "Ecology": "Much of developmental psychology, as it now exists, is the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 19).

This critical standpoint is blended, in a sophisticated and constructive way, with energetic and manifold political commitments. Indeed, over the decades, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) has become a true disciple of American pragmatism and its classical authors: "Basic science needs public policy even more than public policy needs basic science" (p. 8), he has repeatedly affirmed. This principle reflects a programmatic position that transcends the boundaries separating disciplines and paradigms. It also al-

¹See, in this regard, the novel view of the connections between Lewin's philosophy of science, his theory of the genesis of psychological processes, and his ecological perspective in Lang (1991, 1992a).

ludes to the dialectic between observation and commitment, between knowledge and belief, between detachment and involvement.

THE RELEVANCE OF PERSPECTIVES, KNOWLEDGE, AND BELIEFS

Bronfenbrenner's Interpretations

The synergistic strengths of Urie Bronfenbrenner's interpretive talents are, so to speak, already displayed in the way he combines the different connotations of the concept of *ecology*. In his definition, he shows a deep awareness of the biological origins of the term, as it was originally formulated by Haeckel. Urie Bronfenbrenner also takes into account its etymology: its derivation from *oikos*, the Greek word for household. Finally, in the special meaning he gives the concept, he reorients it toward an innovative view of *human development*. This term, too, in Bronfenbrenner's usage, unites three meanings: the development of the individual, the development of mankind as a species, and the interrelations between the two. This is quite compatible with his own programmatic statement: "From its very beginning, the ecology of human development was defined as a 'scientific undertaking' in the discovery mode . . . The aim was not to test hypotheses, but to generate them . . . the goal was to develop a theoretical framework that could provide both structure and direction for the systematic study of organism-environment interaction in processes of human development" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 230).

In regard to the conceptual significance of knowledge and beliefs within the "Ecology of Human Development," my point of departure is Urie Bronfenbrenner's own reinterpretation of his seminal 1958 chapter, "Socialization and Social Class Through Time and Space." It was included in the festschrift in honor of his German colleague Hartmut von Hentig, *Freedom and Discipline Across the Decades* (Bronfenbrenner, 1985). Bronfenbrenner addressed the topic again in his contribution to the Konstanz Symposium on "Intergenerational Relations in 'Postmodern' Societies" (1993b).

The basic argument of "Socialization and Social Class Through Time

and Space” is well-known. In Bronfenbrenner’s own words, it reads as follows:

Conflicting findings on social class differences in parental attitudes and practices could be resolved if one took into account the place and date at which the fieldwork for each investigation had been done. . . . Furthermore, a gradual shift, over time, in advice favoring greater permissiveness was being presented to parents in popular magazines, newspaper columns, radio programs, and, especially before World War II, in the widely-circulated successive editions of the manual on Infant Care published by the Children’s Bureau. The final step in the argument hypothesized that these sources of advice were more often read and heard by middle class mothers. (Bronfenbrenner, 1993b, p. 62)²

What is Bronfenbrenner’s own reinterpretation after three decades, and what insights does it suggest for our topic? Turning to this question, we are well advised to note the relevance of at least four categories of knowledge, namely, the knowledge of parents, the knowledge of their advisers (or of experts), the knowledge of the scholars who study the knowledge of parents and advisers, and, finally, the knowledge of the author himself, Bronfenbrenner, in his reinterpretation. The first category corresponds to what I have labeled above *primary* interpretations, whereas the remaining three categories represent *secondary* interpretations.

Bronfenbrenner (1985) emphasized the following aspects of knowledge and beliefs: “The contents of ‘knowledge and beliefs’ have always been characterized by ambiguity and ambivalence, as far back as Duvall’s (1946) typological juxtaposition of ‘traditional and developmental families’ (pp. 330–333). Blood (1953) changed these terms to *restrictive* versus *permissive* without, as Bronfenbrenner (1985) observed, offering an explicit

²On the microsocial level, I arrived at a similar interpretation concerning the importance of taking into account time and place for data collected in Switzerland using Bronfenbrenner’s well-known Social-Dilemma Instrument. Responses given by pupils were more peer oriented if experiments were carried out in the afternoon, that is, at a time when the ambience was more relaxed than during morning lessons (Lüscher, 1971). I remember how pleased Urie was with this idea; now I see the connection with his more general proposition.

clarification. Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957) raised doubts about the positive consequences of permissiveness in the following sentence quoted by Bronfenbrenner (1985): “Not a few parents have developed what almost amounts to a cult of being permissive about aggression” (p. 333).

Baumrind (1967), following Bronfenbrenner (1985, p. 334), resolved the ambiguity by proposing a distinction among three categories of parental styles and knowledge and beliefs related to them: “Authoritarian, characterized by a high level of control and low nurturance; permissive, exhibiting low control with a moderate degree of nurturance, and, finally, authoritative, marked by high levels of both.” Thus, the contradiction is overcome by, so to speak, classical means, namely, by the introduction of a third element. Bronfenbrenner pointed out that the authoritative style contains exactly those qualities (listed in detail in the article) that are not included in the original two types.³ Was he hinting that a more adequate interpretation of the earlier data would have led to the recognition of this third category?

Bronfenbrenner’s reinterpretation also implied that ethics and politics are a major concern in the analysis of parent–child relations. This can clearly be inferred from the way knowledge and beliefs are rhetorically related to behavior. Bronfenbrenner illustrated this point, for instance, in paying special attention to Symon’s complaint that there is “a tendency to think of children as not quite human beings. . . . Ours is not a child-respecting society” (Bronfenbrenner, 1985, p. 328). Later he stated, “We may infer that good citizens, good scholars, good husbands and wives, and good parents come from homes in which the children are wanted and accepted” (Bronfenbrenner, 1985, p. 330).

What is the basis of this manifest, or in some cases latent, moral dimension? The anthropological arguments ultimately refer to two topics: first, the existential relevance of intergenerational relations for the development of the individual and the community or society and, second, the anthropological openness and even creativity of this development, which are related to the cultural construction of the notion of freedom.

³For a detailed account of the concept of authoritative parenting and its empirical relevance, see Steinberg, Darling, Fletcher, Brown, and Dornbusch, this volume, chapter 13.

Indeed, in "Freedom and Discipline," Bronfenbrenner (1985) first discussed the validity of Baumrind's (1967) results within a positivistic frame of reference. He then moved on, however. He questioned whether *acceptance*, in Symond's terminology, and *permissiveness*, in Baumrind's, could have the same meaning, because one study dated from the 1930s and the other dated from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Referring again to his 1958 article, Bronfenbrenner (1985) pointed to the relevance of societal change. The rise in permissive behavior since the 1950s may have disturbed the balance between freedom and discipline, with disruptive consequences for society. However, stated Bronfenbrenner (1985), this hypothesis could not be proved, because the authors' measures of parental practice "cannot be compared" (p. 336). Bronfenbrenner also engaged in a subtle analysis of the meanings of the words used by the different authors. Finally, his own interpretation invited us to extend the chain of interpretation. He also followed such an approach by offering a further alternative. He started from the assumption that everything that happened within the family, including the relationship between freedom and control, depended on the societal systems surrounding the family. Furthermore, he hypothesized that a higher level of instability in social environments would lead to more subordination, aggressiveness, and uncertainty, especially in the later phases of childhood and for male children. This argument was based on parallelism.⁴

However, despite increasing permissiveness on the side of parents, many scholars claim to see advantages in discipline and demand. How do scholars arrive at this viewpoint? It can be inferred from the existence of families cultivating this style, which can be understood as a potential of the family to respond effectively to permissive societal tendencies. "Who shall win out in the end," concluded Bronfenbrenner (1985), "only history can tell" (p. 337).⁵ This argumentation certainly is a fine example of cre-

⁴On this point, see Kohn's (this volume, chapter 5) arguments concerning "parallelism and cause." Kohn makes a good case for the relevance and the openness of processes of interpretation in academia, and for their perspectivistic character, which ultimately is bound to the personalities of the scholars involved and to the identities of different approaches and disciplines.

⁵This argument is also relevant to the discourse of family and postmodernity. (See Bronfenbrenner, 1993a.) It seems that many contemporary families are touched by the problematization of "personal identity" typical of postmodern culture and society. The question then is whether families are only the victims of these developments or whether they may be the source of new and meaningful forms of socialization. For a further elaboration of these arguments, see Lüscher (1993).

atively interpreting ambiguity and equivocality. It also recalls the struggles over influence and power.

Note how often contradictory or paradoxical findings are pointed to in regard to the functions of knowledge and beliefs, especially in regard to their connection with behavior. For instance, in the reinterpretation of Sigel's (1985) concept of distancing and of Dornbush's survey of parental styles, Bronfenbrenner (1993c) noted that in both cases, these connections seemed not to be very consistent and, in the case of quantitative data (Bronfenbrenner, 1993c, p. 74), the correlations were nonlinear.⁶ However, if the triad of person, context, and process is taken into account, many contradictions can be resolved. It is just this paradigm, stated Bronfenbrenner (1992), which allows, even requires, us to determine whether two elements working together produce a synergistic effect greater than the sum of the effects they produce alone.

In his most recent writings on the role of beliefs in intergenerational relations, Bronfenbrenner took the position that beliefs "could exhibit both remarkable stability and dramatic change over historical time" (see full quote below). This apparent contradiction can be resolved if historical developments are separated from the interplay between the beliefs of parents and the opinions of experts in a first step and are related to each other only in a second step. Again we are reminded of what may be called a *chain of interpretations*. This idea is contained in the following propositions (which are quoted here in their full length because they have, at this date, still not been published in English, see 1993b (pp. 64–65).

Proposition 3

Major determinants of the contents and effects of proximal processes are systems of belief (Bronfenbrenner, 1993a), and knowledge (Lüscher, 1982) about human development and how it takes place. These systems exist on three levels. From a developmental perspective, they originate in the broader sociocultural and institutional structures of the larger society, both formal and informal. These sys-

⁶Thus, Sigel (1985) wrote the following: "The failures to find consistent relationships between beliefs and behaviors is discouraging."

tems of belief and knowledge are then transmitted, through a variety of pathways, into the more immediate settings of family, school, peer group and workplace, where they exert their direct effects on proximal processes. Finally, through the operation of these processes over an extended period of time, systems of belief are internalized and become characteristics of the developing person, and, as such, influence the course of that person's subsequent development.

This is to be seen in relation to Generational Principle 2.

Generational Principle 2

Continuity and change in development from one generation to the next vary systematically as a function of continuity and change over historical time in the contents of systems of knowledge and belief about human development. Of key importance in this regard is the transmission of knowledge and belief from the broader contexts of the ecological environment to the more proximal settings in which development occurs. The former are of two kinds: (a) the formally organized institutions of the larger society, such as health care systems; educational, religious, and scientific institutions; government agencies; social organizations; and, especially in today's world, the mass media; and (b) the informal structures of class, ethnicity, neighborhood, and social networks. The importance of knowledge and belief systems for cross-generational development is twofold. First, such systems can exhibit both remarkable stability and dramatic changes over historical time; second, they are especially powerful in influencing the content, form, and effectiveness of the proximal processes producing development, both within and across generations.⁷

What, then, is the conceptual status of knowledge and beliefs? Noteworthy is the statement in Proposition 3 that they "originate" in the soci-

⁷Because I refer at different points in this chapter to the importance of triadic relationships, it may be worthwhile to note Urie Bronfenbrenner's emphatic pleas for designs which study intergenerational relations over at least three generations.

etal culture and institutional structures of society. In this way, they are to be seen as cultural phenomena (or as culture itself). This conclusion is supported by reference to the well-known fact of their transfer from generation to generation. Proposition 3, concerning continuity and dramatic change, is compatible with the concept of cultural evolution, for instance, development and change in communications and the media.⁸

In addition to the argumentation reconstructed in the previous account, Urie Bronfenbrenner approached the topic of knowledge (and beliefs) in his article on the "Ecology of Cognitive Development" (1993a, p. 6). There, he suggested that we should study cognitions in context. "Thus, it is equally essential for basic science that we understand how encoding operates in learning to read, how memory functions in giving courtroom testimony, or how selective attention operates in the family and the work place, and how such processes develop." The cultural character of systems of cognition is touched on in Bronfenbrenner (1989): "Principle 1: Differences in cognitive performance between groups from different cultures or subcultures are a function of experience, in the course of growing up, with the types of cognitive processes existing in a given culture or subculture at a particular period in its history" (p. 208).

Finally, reference is made in Proposition 3, quoted above (p. 573), to the concept of proximal processes "where they [the 'immediate settings'] exert their direct effects on proximal processes." This remark, even though it is of a somewhat casual character, merits further attention, because it invites reflection on the theoretical and empirical relationship between knowledge and beliefs and proximal processes. Are they best conceived of as independent, yet interrelated? Is it possible, by looking at their interdependence, to further clarify the still somewhat vague notion of proximal processes? Before answering these questions, it seems appropriate to briefly discuss other approaches to the significance of knowledge and beliefs.

⁸See, for example, the writings of Walter J. Ong (1967, 1971), who differentiates among three stages: oral culture, alphabets and print, and electronics. He also points "to the rhetorical tradition as one key to understanding much that went on in the past and much that is going on in our own times, as well as much that may come about in the future" (Ong, 1971, p. ix).

Contemporary Conceptualizations of Knowledge and Beliefs

The questions just raised also provide a link to recent concerns within developmental psychology and socialization theory, where knowledge and beliefs have received increasing attention, and this for good reason. It is a central feature of contemporary (postmodern) societies that people are exposed to an overabundance of information. This is also true in regard to information about the care and education of children, because traditional perspectives, although still widespread, are losing their plausibility. People are looking for new orientations. They are also inclined to develop individualistic justifications for their conduct and to plan their life in terms of personal goals (see also Clausen, this volume, chapter 11).

This is not the place for a lengthy discussion of the literature—even less so now that several reviews have been published recently, including D'Alessio (1990); Goodnow (1984); Molinari, Emiliani, and Carugati (1992); Murphey (1992); Sigel (1985); Sutherland (1983); and Schultheis and Lüscher (1987) for the European literature. In their historical retrospective, Goodnow and Collins (1990) demarcated two periods of increasing interest in knowledge and beliefs in socialization theory. During the 1960s, the first works appeared that dealt with the topic—among them those of Hess and Handel (1959) and Stolz (1967)—without, however, arousing great interest. In the 1980s, there was renewed interest, borne, among other things, by the use of cognitive approaches in developmental psychology and socialization research, as well as by a general interest in everyday life and what were labeled *lay theories*, *naive theories*, or *everyday life theories* (*Alltagstheorien*). In this period, there appeared, among others, several compilations by Sigel (e.g., 1985) and studies by Goodnow (e.g., 1984). A third phase, which immediately followed this, was characterized by varied empirical research activity, as is documented by recently published overviews. These, however, also showed that there was a need for an overarching conceptualization. Would not the ecology of human development be an appropriate framework for this?

The relationship of knowledge and beliefs to behavior stands in the foreground of empirical research in the tradition of developmental psy-

chology. Murphey (1992) constructed a model for this purpose around which he ordered his overview of the literature: “The model shows parental beliefs, both global and specific, joining parental behavior in mediating child outcomes” (p. 201). The elaboration of the model made it clear that Murphey was, on the whole, very close to viewing beliefs as ultimately the result of interpretive processes.

A useful definitional proposition was offered by Sigel (1985), in his “Conceptual Analysis of Beliefs.” He argued that beliefs presupposed the truth of what was believed. Knowledge, in his opinion, was characterized by a dependence on facts, on verifiable information. From this, Sigel concluded that “beliefs are knowledge in the sense that the individual knows that what he (or she) espouses is true or probably true, and evidence may or may not be deemed necessary; or if evidence is used, it forms a basis for the belief but is not the belief itself” (p. 348). Furthermore, “in sum, beliefs are constructions of reality. They may incorporate knowledge of what and of how, but do not necessitate evidential propositions. Beliefs are considered as truth statements even though evidence for their veridicality may or may not exist” (Sigel, 1985, p. 349).⁹ Following this lead, I suggest that we conceive of knowledge and beliefs as complementary in regard to action: Incomplete knowledge, in the sense of information, may be supplemented by beliefs. But beliefs may also guide people’s sensitivity to factual matters and their selection of information.

Propositions for an Interpretive Conceptualization

Before this background, and with special reference to major concerns within the general program of the “Ecology of Human Development,” I propose that we conceptualize knowledge and beliefs as a constituent of proximal processes. If the latter are “the mechanism through which genetic potentials are actualized” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993c, p. 56), or if “genotypes are translated into phenotypes” (Ceci & Hembroke, this vol-

⁹In their discussion of definitional matters, Goodnow and Collins (1990) pleaded for “parental ideas” (p. 12), without, however, giving a formal definition. (See, also, Goodnow’s contribution to this volume—chapter 8—which may also be read as an invitation for an interdisciplinary approach.)

ume, chapter 9, p. 308), then knowledge and beliefs stand for the “recognition” of their relevance. In other words, within the ecology of human development, knowledge and beliefs express the meanings that are attributed to the relations between the biological equipment and the environment; these attributions are organized in perspectives proper to the persons, groups, or socialities that originate, influence, and evaluate these meanings.¹⁰ This also implies that proximal processes always go together with interpretations.

Thus, it is assumed that the behaviors that are the focus of the ecology of human development are displayed and can be observed in the realm of nurture, mostly in immediate settings, such as the family, the school, the home, or the university. To analyze human development, it is important to consider the facts of the biological nature of man, not least because they provide a genetic basis for the person’s individuality. Yet, what happens in immediate settings is always and necessarily embedded in culture, namely, the world into which man is born, with the properties of general human sociality and the properties of specific socialities, as expressed in the cultural identities of ethnic groups, nations, or subcultures.

My proposition and its underlying assumptions are rooted in a pragmatic¹¹ understanding of science, particularly in its implication for a (moderate) social constructivism. It is reasonable (at least for scientific purposes) to consider only those phenomena as real for which we have ideas concerning their effects.¹² This view does not necessarily imply that the ideas must be formulated explicitly, precisely, and consciously or that they need always be socially manifest. They can be latent—contained, for example, in metaphors, in rituals, in customs, or in other forms of symbolic

¹⁰I see a close relationship between this view and Elder’s (this volume, chapter 4) statement, “the biological course of events and their meaning are core elements of a person’s life history” (p. 104), and with the basic orientation in Ceci and Hembrooke’s contribution (chapter 9), although they start from different premises.

¹¹Following Peirce, I prefer the term *pragmatic* over *pragmatic* because the latter may evoke associations with the ordinary language sense of the word, which often restricts itself to the notion of usefulness.

¹²To recall Peirce’s doctrine of pragmatism contained in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (orig. 1878): “402. . . . Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the objects of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.”

expression. It is the task and the purpose of scholarly analysis to uncover the different meanings lying behind those manifestations and actions.

To state this in general terms within an interpretive framework: Theoretical and empirical research should aim to reconstruct and to reinterpret the processes through which people attribute, deliberately or not, verbally or nonverbally, meanings to their behaviors within given contexts and to uncover the links in the chains of those processes from the micro- to the macrosystems and vice versa.

This also means that proximal processes may be located at the intersection between biology and culture. From the perspective of the bioecological model, as it is sketched out in this volume by Ceci and Hembrooke (chapter 9) and by Bronfenbrenner (chapter 19), an individual’s biological potential is realized in concrete microcontexts. The organization of processes can be seen as consisting of selective mechanisms. Simultaneously, this organization requires—in my (sociological) view—acts of interpretation, which may also involve processes of selection, namely, from the stock of knowledge and beliefs available in a given culture and within a given pattern relevant to the social organization of the processes of socialization. In both cases, contingencies allow for new patterns of behavior. Another conceptual approach may be elaborated if knowledge and beliefs are seen as resources at the disposal of the individual and of the society. Such a view parallels Moen and Erickson’s (this volume, chapter 6) understanding of resilience.

Furthermore, note that knowledge and beliefs may have a spontaneous and naive character and that they may be the subjects of reflection by acting parents themselves and, even more so, by those observing and analyzing parental behaviors. These persons’ knowledge and beliefs are also expressed in advice and instruction.

Thus, the second kind of knowledge and beliefs involves awareness of awareness or, technically speaking, different levels of the reflection of naive knowledge and beliefs.¹³ Because nowadays, social reality is highly differ-

¹³Such a distinction may be found in several general theories of action, such as Schütz (1963a, 1963b). See also Lenk (1994).

entiated and complex, many more groups of people are engaged in processes of reflecting on knowledge and beliefs concerning the proximal processes of human development. Consequently, we can distinguish a multitude of forms of reflective knowledge and beliefs at different levels of societal organization. Each involves processes of interpretation, both of the basic behaviors and of their spontaneous understanding and existing interpretations. The metaphor of chains of interpretations seems highly appropriate.

As far as the perspectivistic character of knowledge and beliefs is concerned, I add to the remarks made in the introduction draw on Mead's use of the concept of perspective to describe "the world in its relationship to the individual and the individual in his relationship to the world" (Mead, 1938, p. 115). Here, the term *world*, as opposed to *environment*, indicates a reflexive use of a social logic that enables us to include the individual as part of the world. Also significant is the emphasis Mead (1938) places on reciprocity, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and on a plurality of perspectives: "Perspectives have objective existence" (1938, p. 114). Mead continues: "The obverse of this proposition is that the perspective is not subjective. In other words, there is always a perceptual world, that is itself a perspective within which the subjective arises. The subjective is that experience in the individual which takes the place of the object when the reality of the object, at least in some respects, lies in an uncertain future" (1938, p. 114).¹⁴

I see two good reasons why the idea of perspectivity can be most useful for the theoretical assessment of the relevance of knowledge and beliefs, and even more so within the "ecology." First, the concept assumes the simultaneity of behavior and its *re-cognition*, that is, the simultaneity of conduct and knowledge (or beliefs), and it refers to the necessity to construct a relation between them. In this way, it points out the necessity and the relevance of processes of interpretation and thereby brings in the interpreter. Second, by referring to this triadic operation as fundamental to give meaning to reality, it is a promising attempt to conceive this reality

¹⁴For a lengthier discussion of this concept, see Lüscher (1990).

as permanently emerging, as development, and as embedded, ultimately, in the process of evolution.

I am aware of the abstract character of this argument and of the fact that several steps are needed to prove its usefulness for research. Given the scope of this presentation, I must restrict myself to some considerations that are necessarily incomplete in the logic of their abduction. Nevertheless, they may illustrate what I think to be the fruitfulness of the argument.

Implications for Research

In most instances, knowledge and beliefs are expressed in speech and in writings, for example; they are linguistic phenomena. They stand for observations and for experiences (which may be real, personal, mediated, or fictional), and they refer to processes of personal development (be it that of a child, her or his parents, or their interrelationships) and can be—at least in most cases—traced back to proximal processes.

Thus, to infer their meaning, it may be necessary to analyze their historical and current connotations. To review the history of concepts may be an important prerequisite for research. This may also be important if findings are to be compared and generalized. The history of the concept of "family" is an excellent example of the interplay between tasks and social contents. I also recall Bronfenbrenner's (1985) remarks concerning the recent transformation of "traditional/developmental families" into "restrictive/permissive families" (p. 334). An awareness that the knowledge and beliefs of both subjects and analysts are culture bound, even if it is knowledge concerning proximal processes, reminds us of the limitations of our interpretations and encourages further interpretations. Maccoby's (this volume, chapter 10) essay "The Two Sexes and Their Social Systems" provides, as a whole and in many details, an excellent analysis for the functions of interpretive processes in regard to gender. Clausen (this volume, chapter 11) points out how the reconstruction of turning points may serve to crystalize the interpretation and evaluation of certain situations in view of their impact on personal biographies.

Concrete formulations of knowledge and belief can be conceived as

links in chains of interpretation, as conceptions of the tasks of socialization, and as the situations and consequences of the processes of human development. Therefore, it may be appropriate and useful, on one side, to relate the ideas of parents to general notions of human development, of childhood, and of the family and to the understanding of the relationships within and between generations.¹⁵ It may also be important, on the other side, to look for the sources of information that parents use: their reference groups; the media they draw on; and their political, religious, and ideological affiliations. This, of course, is the dominant line of the interpretive argument in Bronfenbrenner's (1958) "Socialization and Social Class Through Time and Space."

In this connection, it may be equally important to look at the histories of cultural ideas on childhood or the child¹⁶ and notions of the family from the view of the social sciences and to analyze examples of social reports on the status of the family, the status of children, or the situation of women.¹⁷ Conceptually, bridges may be built to work on social representations.¹⁸

However, note also that different levels of interpretation and of generalization may be interrelated in patterns that are not hierarchically organized. Very general notions may be combined with specific experiences. I would like to illustrate this point with an insight from our own studies

¹⁵See as examples of recent German works in this field: Gloger-Tippelt (1991) and Gloger-Tippelt and Tippelt (1986). Moch (1993) showed the relevance of such representations in families that must be restructured and reorganized after a divorce by couples married for 15–20 years.

¹⁶I have attempted to sketch out the broad outlines of the history of the social role of the child in regard to his or her bearings in an analysis of socialization–knowledge in Lüscher (1975) and recently of the notions of the child contained in propositions concerning social policies for children (Lüscher & Lange 1992).

¹⁷Still another fruitful approach to analyzing these processes may be seen in the study of counseling processes. See, for example, von Cranach, Thommen, and Ammann (1988).

¹⁸The concept of "social representations" is grounded in the metaphor of the "thinking society," derived from Durkheimian ideas. Interest is then directed toward the spread of different forms of knowledge (so to speak its "epidemiology"). Furthermore, the focus is not merely on the processing of information, or on the adoption and differential acceptance of hierarchical orderings and corresponding values, but rather on the conflict among them. An analysis of the theoretical and empirical implications of the concept of "social representations" and its possible compatibility with the ecology of human development is still to be made. It may lead to new insights, particularly in regard to socialization knowledge. See, for example, Farr (1993) and Doise, Clemence, and Lorenzi-Cioldi (1993). Billig (1993) and McKinlay, Potter, and Wetherell (1993) try to build a bridge to the study of rhetoric.

of what we called the "everyday conceptions of young mothers" (Fisch, Lüscher, & Pape, 1982). We determined, among other things, that the everyday educational concepts of young parents are characterized by two basic principles: "overarching generalizations and individual peculiarities. The first relates to general conceptions of societal values and norms and not seldom has ideological characteristics; the second rests on individual experience and comprehends a specific conception of individuality" (Fisch et al., 1982, p. 203). We termed this individuality *experienced individuality*, to express the idea that parents do not merely experience their children and themselves as individuals, but as persons, as "Sylvia" or "Mark." This sort of "individuality" is for parents partly the "end" and partly the "ground" of action (Fisch et al., 1982, p. 204).

I would also suggest that we see these complex processes of interpretation as a potential source of new and creative solutions. They concern, first, the tasks of socialization as such, but second, they may also be innovative with regard to more general patterns and contents of culture. Each context may be an instance in which issues—tasks, problems, means, and methods—may be affirmed or altered or even radically changed—in other words, may be interpreted anew. Remember, for example, Bronfenbrenner's reference to both continuity and abrupt change, mentioned in the Generational Principle 2, mentioned above.

At the same time, each link may also be a context of open or hidden tensions; conflicts; or even of struggles over interests, influence, power, or the legitimization of power (*Herrschaft*). Knowledge and beliefs can be the targets of these conflicts or the reason for them, but they may also be merely instruments for settling other issues.¹⁹ Examples may easily be found in debates over family policy or over policies for children, and even—on a secondary level—over the appropriateness of these two kinds of social policy!

The existential importance of proximal processes for the development of the individual person, of groups, and of the society at large; the man-

¹⁹See also Goodnow's (1990) plea for more intensive study of the impact of societal power structures on parental ideas.

ifold possibilities for shaping them; and the unpredictability of future developments give knowledge a certain openness and uncertainty and even a certain aleatory character, which must be complemented by beliefs and ultimately by convictions and ideologies. In this connection, the study of knowledge and beliefs can be related to a new interest in rhetoric. This particular form of public communication ultimately aims to influence not only how people act but also how they see and evaluate certain tasks. In other words, rhetoric also aims, with the use of very special strategies, to influence processes of interpretation. Thus, family rhetoric may consist of statements on what the family is or should be and how it should function. Explicitly or implicitly, many statements of family rhetoric refer to the social organization of proximal processes (e.g., day care or mother-child relations). The study of family rhetoric may also include analysis of the images of the family as well as strategies through which political arguments are legitimized.²⁰

If we return to the idea, implicit in Bronfenbrenner's postulation, of a connection between knowledge and beliefs and proximal processes, we may combine this postulate with the notion of chains of interpretation. Consequently, it may well be worthwhile to insist that core aspects of proximal processes should be seen as points of departure (and also to engage in a discussion of what these core aspects are). Initially, two come immediately to mind: the development of intelligence, or cognitive ability—a topic already given high priority by Bronfenbrenner in connection with the relevance of heredity—and, furthermore, the development of gender identities, again to be related to the issue of biological potentials. Attention may also be paid to what is called by Bronfenbrenner (1993b) “enhancing functional competence and . . . reducing degrees of dysfunctions” (p. 34; and to deepening the significance of this juxtaposition both theoretically and empirically).

Finally, within research designs, we may vary the angle of the triadic

²⁰The analysis of family rhetoric is part of an ongoing program on family and family policy at Konstanz, Germany. See Lüscher, Wehrspaun, and Lange (1989), Walter (1993), Lamm-Heß and Wehrspaun (1993), Lüscher (1994), and Ringwald (1994).

structure from which we start. Why should we always take for a given a certain context, such as the family (and perhaps differentiate it into certain subtypes), and then look for its effects on interpretations and behaviors?²¹ Why not reverse the order and ask instead why certain behaviors are claimed to fall within the concept of “family”? I am referring here to public debates on what is or should be meant by “family.” More generally speaking, such a reversal may guide our search for socialization settings located outside of traditional conceptions—a proposition that may be seen as recalling some of the very early concerns of social science.

Methodological Considerations

How can we properly assess knowledge and beliefs? Is it sufficient to operationalize them in terms of attitudes, of norms, and of values? There can be no doubt about the wealth of information and insights provided by the use of these concepts, which by now are consecrated by their long tradition and are ennobled by the sophistications contained in more and more differentiated methods of measurement. Yet many reviewers and observers agree that there remain some open and disturbing questions. Two of them stand out, namely, the problem of causality and the problem of (ecological) validity, which require new approaches.

In regard to causality, I may quote from Murphey's (1992) review:

The relationship between beliefs and behavior is one that has bedeviled social psychologists (and opinion survey research in general) for years. In part, this stems from the difficulty of obtaining valid measures of people's beliefs or attitudes, but also from the fact that behavior in almost any situation is determined by multiple factors. . . . It seems particularly likely . . . that parents sometimes act first, and reflect later . . . parents may construct beliefs in order to rationalize or justify the way they already behave.” (p. 204)

²¹A similar change in point of view (or of perspective) has been proposed by Krappmann (1985) within a set of theoretical considerations for the study of socialization based on Mead's (1938) ideas concerning play and games.

arises as to which configuration of context, act, and person evokes conscious and verbal statements of motives, reasons, or goals—in other words, of knowledge and beliefs—and, furthermore, which configurations lead to a search for new ideas. Acting, conceived of on these premises, follows the logic of “abduction,” in the sense of Peirce (see, e.g., Peirce, 1970, pp. 365–388).

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

Knowledge and beliefs in the ecology of human development, with reference to the notion of proximal processes, are the cultural counterparts of the biological equipment of human beings. Phenomenologically speaking, they may be observable in all kinds of verbal and nonverbal actions and symbols, and they may be analyzed under the assumption that they express the meanings that subjects attribute to the tasks involved in the organization of personal human development (or of socialization). The contents of knowledge and beliefs may be considered as elements of perspectives, which, in turn, represent theories of the relations of subjects to the worlds in which they live and the identities that are constituted by these relations. The worlds and the identities may be located in micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. Knowledge and beliefs are activated in processes of interpretation through which (or by which) subjects individually and collectively define situations, relying on previous experiences, selecting from the information provided by general stocks of knowledge and beliefs, and taking into account—consciously or unconsciously—representations of themselves and of the socialities to which subjects want or are forced to belong or to which they aspire. In this way, knowledge and beliefs define meanings that change in the course of time, and thus, they can be conceived as parts of chronosystems.

As a consequence, I consider the analysis of the act called interpretation (or should I say, the actions called interpretation) as a strategic part of research on the ecology of human development, as well as a part of related approaches. I see a great potential for directing our attention to this research task, and I would like to close with some general considerations.

The image of man expressed in these considerations is the image of a *homo interpretans*. I suggest this label in reference to an argument elabo-

rated by Lenk (1994). He stressed the point that higher species also have capacities for symbolic communication, which presuppose interpretive skills, and he, therefore, held the view that ultimately the difference might be seen in the ability for meta-interpretation. The crucial difference lies in the capacity, which is at the same time a necessity, to develop an understanding of symbol-making and symbol-using interpretation. The deeper reason may be seen in man's relation to nature. The very fact that, to develop this argument, I can use, but also must use, a term for nature illustrates this point. More generally speaking, the impact of nature, although it is the primary environment of man, is not accessible to him directly and instinctively, but only as mediated through language and thought. There are good reasons to claim that, for humankind, there is no nature without culture.

It is just this idea that underlies my proposition that we see knowledge and beliefs as constituents to the “biological mechanism” to which Bronfenbrenner refers in his delineation of “proximal processes” (1993a, p. 56). Furthermore, knowledge and beliefs may be seen as linked to micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, and their dynamics can be related to different chronosystems, particularly the temporal developments of personal biographies and of history.

Throughout this chapter, I emphasized the importance of processes of interpretation, and the question may arise as to the difference between explanation and interpretation. On a methodological level, I would like to suggest the following distinction. Explanations are interpretations with reference to a highly differentiated, in many instances even formalized, system of propositions and hypotheses. They are based on (or oriented toward) a binary logic of confirmation or falsification. Ideally, each correct explanation confirms a theory as a whole, whereas each falsification raises questions about at least parts of a theory and, depending on the weight of these parts, may force its revision or abandonment. Thus, explaining, as it is understood here, is a formalized process. Interpreting, in turn, is much more open, dynamic, and innovative. Its rules are less formalized. It is related to the search for meaning.

In regard to theory, and particularly the ecology of human development, this distinction directs our attention to what I would like to call the "paradox of research on socialization." Essentially, it consists of the fact that the image of man underlying most theories of socialization, or human development in one way or another, presupposes an individuality of the subject as a person. This individuality includes a genuine unpredictability of his or her actions and biography. Yet the aim of socialization theory is precisely to explain, and consequently to predict, behaviors and developments. This paradox may be solved if we include in our conceptualization modes of reflection, which themselves are open to idiosyncrasies and the emergence of the genuinely new, both in everyday behavior and in its analysis. Ultimately, it is just this quality that may be seen as the difference between interpretations and explanations, or to put it simply: Interpretations transcend explanations.

CODA

In preparing my contribution to this volume elaborating on Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development, I saw myself engaging in a style of academic work that he himself has mastered and refined to a high degree, namely, the act of interpreting observations, data, and the writings of others and that of reconsidering his own ideas. I became attracted by his increasing interest in knowledge and beliefs and challenged by a certain openness of his notion of proximal processes. Following his characterization of the ecology of human development as a scientific adventure in the "discovery mode" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 230), I felt confirmed in my belief in the affinity and relevance of pragmatistic orientations to the theoretical foundations of the study of human development. At the same time, I became aware of how deeply Bronfenbrenner's thinking and work are rooted in these traditions, which themselves originated, early in this century, in a differentiated interplay between European and American philosophy and social thought. In Bronfenbrenner's writings, these theoretical foundations are dealt with more implicitly than explicitly, although—as I gradually realized in the course of my discussions with him—he is quite conscious of them. The occasion of the symposium and this resulting volume and the

topic of knowledge and beliefs have provided excellent opportunities to remind us of this side of his oeuvre.

As for the fundamental significance of processes of interpretation in everyday life, we may remember one of the opening statements in the "Ecology": "What matters for behavior and development is the environment as it is perceived rather than as it may exist in 'objective' reality" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 4). In this connection, again and again, Bronfenbrenner displays a fascination for the Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 23). However, in his recent oral commentaries, and in connection with his interest in proximal processes, Bronfenbrenner does not understand the theorem as a law, but rather as a hypothesis whose scope must be empirically explored.

The Thomas theorem expresses in a nutshell, yet not without ambiguities, one of the overarching ideas of American pragmatism. Its founding fathers, such as Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, and Thomas himself, all worked on the development of a general theory of human action. They elaborated the synchronic interplay between individual and societal development. Is not this concern also very neatly contained in the dimensions of the term *human development* within the project of the "Ecology of Human Development"? We may also remember the broad attention given by Mead (1934) to the biological preconditions for the "conversation of gestures and of the development of the human self" (p. 63). The inclination is strong to relate Mead's thoughts more profoundly to Bronfenbrenner's model of proximal processes. More generally speaking, we are invited to explore the extent to which the formulations of the "Ecology of Human Development" could be seen as empirically oriented successors to Mead's (1934) general theory on the interrelations between "mind, self and society," their biological foundations, their social and cultural expressions, and the policy implications of social scientific research.

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EXAMINING LIVES IN CONTEXT

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