Children’s development under conditions of poverty: A cultural–ecological analysis

Jonathan Tudge
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

This was an extremely interesting set of chapters, focusing in different, but related, ways on the relations among poverty, parents’ and institutional experiences of poverty, and children’s development. My goal in this commentary is to describe, very briefly, each of the chapters and then provide an overarching theoretical perspective that I will subsequently use to contextualize the authors’ research.

The Chapters

Chavez, Borrioni, and Mesquita approach the issue from a cultural–historical perspective, analyzing what happened to abandoned children who were raised in a Bahian institution (the Holy House of Mercy) in the nineteenth century. As Chavez and his colleagues point out, to understand the ways in which poverty is perceived and society’s reaction to those who are destitute one has to take into account contemporary ideologies, values, beliefs and practices. As these change across both historical time and cultural group, no comprehension of poverty is complete without specifying current cultural norms.

The remaining chapters in this group deal with contemporary poverty both in Salvador, the capital of Bahia, and in Cali, Colombia. Hormaza, Maceres, and Rios, who conducted their research in the latter city, make the argument that low socioeconomic status cannot be treated as the cause of children’s poor cognitive development. Social class is simply too distal a factor, and one must look to more proximal factors, such as what is actually going on in the contexts in which families live, if one wishes to understand children’s cognitive development. Their research
draws on 69 three-, four-, and five-year-olds and their families who are part of a community home care program.

The chapter by dos Santos, dos Santos, and Barreto makes a very similar point, showing that poverty, *per se*, is not responsible for children’s cognitive deficits. Living in conditions of poverty is not helpful for children’s development, but their data, based on 320 two- to three-year-old children and their families in Salvador, reveal that family activities and interactions are of crucial importance. Even when living in poverty, mothers who encouraged their children to play games and who were responsive with them, had children who were cognitively more advanced than those who were not. Dos Santos and her colleagues also noted that attendance at preschool or child-care centers was also beneficial to these children.

Lordelo and Moreira expand on this last point, providing an in-depth analysis of the ways in which attendance in two child-care centers had a positive impact on the young children who attended them, on their mothers, and on the community itself. Lordelo and Moreira noted that there are scholars who have argued that attendance in full-time child care is not at all beneficial to the children’s development, but Lordelo and Moreira pointed out that child-care centers, with educators who are trained and interested in helping both the children and the mothers, can have a very positive influence at a variety of levels.

Finally, the chapter by Oliveira Lima provides a powerful examination of the depth of poverty that some Brazilian families live in. The level of misery is hard to imagine for readers who do not work with families in poverty, and given that poverty itself has different meanings across both historical time and geographical space, is likely to be surprising for those whose knowledge of poverty comes from the “developed” world in the 21st century. What is also
surprising is the determination of the mother, the nature of the child, and the potential influence on development of caring individuals from social service agencies.

**Contextualist Theories**

What I’d like to do now is to try to put the findings from these chapters into a broader context. Several of the sets of authors drew explicitly on one or other of what Pepper (1942) termed contextualist theories. The term “contextualist” does not mean that they are theories about context, but rather are theories that hold development to be the emergent property of the intersection of individual and context, where context is viewed both spatially and temporally (Tudge, 2008a). Most important in these theories is the place in which that intersection occurs, when individuals act and interact with others in the course of engaging in normal, everyday, activities. Pepper described the “root metaphor” for contextualism as the “historic event,” although this is a misleading term, given that he defined it as “the event alive in its present” (1942, p. 232). Accordingly, he argued, it is what is currently happening that is most important. Historic events “are like incidents in the plot of a novel or drama. They are literally the incidents of life” (p. 233). The best known contextualist theories are those of Lev Vygotsky, invoked by Chavez and his colleagues, and Urie Bronfenbrenner, discussed by Hormaza et al., dos Santos and her colleagues, and by Lordelo and Moreira.

I have written about both (see, e.g., Tudge, 2008a; Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2008; Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003), and pointed out that they are both limited in different ways—Vygotsky paid minimal attention to what the individual brings to any situation and, surprisingly for a theory termed cultural-historical, does not have a well developed sense of the role that culture plays in development. Bronfenbrenner, by contrast, apart from some discussion in chapters in 1989 and 1993, wrote as though optimal development can be characterized by the
best practices of white middle-class North Americans. Nonetheless, whether using either of these
theories or cultural–ecological theory, as I term my contextualist theory (Tudge, 2008b), one can
understand better the relations among poverty, family interactions, and children’s development.

In each of these theories, activities and interactions are of central importance, but the
nature of the activities and interactions varies both because of the characteristics of the
individuals involved and because of the context. The context can be conceptualized in various
ways, including the local contexts in which activities and interactions occur, more distal contexts
(socio-structural or cultural groups, consisting of different social classes, ethnic/racial groups, or
societies), and temporal context (the historical period of the activities and interactions of interest).

Activities and interactions. An important concept in Vygotsky’s theory is that of the zone
of proximal development. The zone may be created in the course of interaction between a child
and a more competent person, peer or adult, and helps the less competent individual acquire
greater skill or understanding than he or she had previously (Vygotsky, 1987). For Vygotsky, in
other words, interactions are important to the extent to which they are likely to lead to greater
competence, with competence defined in cultural and historical terms.

For Bronfenbrenner, proximal processes are the heart of the theory; they are
conceptualized as the engines of development. Bronfenbrenner defined proximal processes as
regularly occurring activities and interactions that take place, with increasing complexity, over
extended periods of time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006).
Bronfenbrenner, like Vygotsky, also had in mind the types of activities and interactions that are
likely to lead to healthy or optimal development. Unfortunately, at least from my point of view,
Bronfenbrenner never included in the mature form of the theory the sense that what qualifies as
optimal development is likely to vary from culture to culture (see Tudge, 2008a; Tudge et al., 2008).

In cultural–ecological theory, too, typically occurring everyday practices, or the activities and interactions that frequently occur, are the most important things to know about if one wishes to understand development. These typically occurring activities help to determine how development will occur, but do not imply any particular direction to that development.

**Individual characteristics.** Why do these interactions occur in the ways in which they do? One important factor, in each of these theories, is the individual characteristics of the people involved. Vygotsky wrote very little about these individual characteristics, although he is clear that any given context will be experienced differently according to the nature of the individuals within (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003; Vygotsky, 1994). Bronfenbrenner, far from being the theorist of context, as he is so often portrayed (Tudge et al., 2008), became increasingly explicit, as his theory developed, about the varying ways in which individuals change the proximal processes in which they are involved. Cultural–ecological theory takes a similar position to Bronfenbrenner’s theory with regard to the active role individuals play in transforming their own contexts (Tudge, 2008b).

**Context.** The other major factor in any contextualist theory is that of context, which can be sub-divided into local context, social and cultural context, and historical context. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory stresses that culture, as developed over historical time, is central for understanding the ways in which people develop. However, he paid little attention to sub-cultural or local contextual variations.

Bronfenbrenner, by contrast, is best known for his levels of context. Two of these directly involve the developing person of interest—microsystems, where activities and interactions occur,
and mesosystems, or the interrelations among two or more microsystems. Two other levels of context have indirect influences on the developing person of interest. Exosystems are essentially microsystems in which the developing individual is not situated, such as the place where a child’s father works. The impact of what happens in the workplace influences the child indirectly, as when, for example, the father is stressed because of what has happened at work and therefore deals with less patience with his child. The macrosystem, equivalent to society or a within-society cultural group for Bronfenbrenner, also has an indirect influence on developing individuals, because of the values, beliefs, practices, and access to resources that the group holds in common. Bronfenbrenner used the concept of chronosystem to indicate that the macrosystem changes over historical time (Tudge, 2008a).

Cultural–ecological theory also takes into account varying layers of context, but, compared to Bronfenbrenner, pays more attention to the possible tensions that exist within any single society because of variations in values, beliefs, and practices of groups that differ in terms of racial/ethnic identity, social class, and region. Moreover, this theory (as is true of any contextualist theory) must take into consideration the impact of historical time on developmental processes.

*Contextualizing the Chapters*

With this theoretical framework in mind, we can see more clearly, I think, why it is that Dos Santos and her colleagues found, in their study of young children and their families in Salvador, that the mothers’ “provision of appropriate materials and games, [child care] attendance and emotional involvement” (Ms pp. 12-13) with their children were the most important predictors of the children’s cognitive development. Engagement in everyday activities and interactions with young children should, from a theoretical point of view, have a clear
impact on their development. These authors do not seem to have data on what actually occurred in the child-care centers that the children attended, but argue that in those settings “the infant can be constantly presented with cognitively challenges with stimuli that are rarely present in the home environment, due to a scarcity of material and educational resources” (MS p. 16).

Lordelo and Moreira, by contrast, focused their attention on the activities and interactions in which the children and their mothers were involved while in child care. These authors paid particular attention to the “rich experiences” that were provided to the children, and the ways in which the centers tried to integrate the mothers as much as possible. It was clearly helpful to those mothers who are engaged with the teachers and administrators, and for the latter to learn more about the families’ lives from the mothers. One of the purposes of integrating the mothers into the child-care centers was clearly to try to help change the ways in which the mothers interacted with their children at home. As Lordelo and Moreira concluded, policies are needed that help families to raise and educate their children well; in other words, to bring about changes in the activities and interactions of families living in poverty.

Hormaza and her colleagues, describing their research in Colombia, used Bronfenbrenner only as a reference for context. Rather than use his concept of proximal processes, they cited others (Garcia-Coll; Myers; Rodrigo; Tenorio) to the effect that important features of context have to do with child-rearing practices, socialization, and interpersonal relationships. As Hormaza et al. stated, “the practices performed by each family member should be taken into consideration,” including “entertainment, care, and educational practices” (MS p. 4). Hormaza and colleagues found that although parental expectations for their children was most related to the latter’s cognitive development, of second-most importance was the mothers’ use of those practices. They argued: “It can be assumed that high expectations about the children’s future
pave the way to parents’ formative practices that facilitate [the children’s] cognitive development” (MS p. 15).

Although the other two papers do not go into the same type of detail about the impact of everyday activities and interactions, it is clear from the work of Chavez and his colleagues that the goal of producing boys who are capable of productive labor and girls who will become marriageable prospects is brought about by the everyday experiences that these children had in the Holy House of Mercy in Bahia during the nineteenth century. Similarly, as Oliveira Lima noted, one cannot understand the development of Maria de Jó without understanding the typical interactions she has both with Macabéa (her mother) and with the attorney who is so instrumental in helping the family.

From a contextualist theoretical standpoint, focus should be on these types of everyday activities and interactions. However, they are heavily influenced by the contexts in which they occur. Chavez and his colleagues nicely show the ways in which changes in historical time (the Enlightenment, changes in ideology about philanthropic giving and the role of government in people’s lives, and the particular context of nineteenth century Brasil have an effect on some of the abandoned children in Salvador. Needless to say, this institution (the Holy House of Mercy), only helped a small fraction of the children who were in need at this time. Nonetheless, the role of contemporary ideas, and particularly that of training children and adolescents to become productive members of society (particularly when slavery was in the process of being abolished), had a huge impact on the types of activities and interactions in which the children and adolescents could engage.

Authors of the other chapters deal did not deal with historical factors so explicitly, although both Oliveira Lima and Lordelo and Moreira noted the potential impact of legal
changes related to children and adolescents and their limited implementation of these policies in practice. However, when writing about Brasil, Colombia, or any other society we should no more ignore what has happened historically in that society and what is currently occurring politically and economically, than we should ignore any aspect of spatial or cultural context. The structural features of poverty are not set in stone; they have a history, and are currently undergoing change, as can be seen by the effects of the Brasilian “bolsa familia” (the monthly subsidy given to poverty-stricken families who commit to send their children to school).

Even something such as the nature of child-care institutions can be explained by historical factors. As Freitas and her colleagues (Freitas & Shelton, 2005; Freitas, Shelton, & Tudge, 2008) has demonstrated, in both the United States and Brasil early care and education for young children have two quite distinct roots. In both societies, children of the poor or of working-class families from the nineteenth century onwards were cared for in day-care centers, whereas their rich or middle-class counterparts were educated in half-day preschools. Even today, the education of the poor is far more focused on training them for the skills (including sitting still and listening) they will need in school whereas the focus for middle-class children is on the “whole child.” Examination of Brasilian creches in any part of the country reveals large differences in the quality of facilities, materials, and number and experience of teachers depending on whether the setting is designed for children of the poor or of the wealthy.

There are, of course, exceptions. Lordelo and Moreira showed what child-care centers can do to help both children and families; both seem to have committed and caring teachers, and would constitute a good place for children to spend time. However, I am not optimistic that the positive comments made by Dos Santos and her colleagues about the role of child care (quoted earlier) are supported in reality. There clearly are child-care centers that provide a stimulating
environment for the child, but many others that do not. If the center simply provides a safe place for children to play with others, or to learn to sit quietly and do what the teacher says, it is difficult to know why it should prove a better place than the home to foster cognitive development.

As Lordelo and Moreira pointed out, some American authors (of whom Belsky is the best known), have strongly argued that children who attend early child care are disadvantaged as a result. I would be cautious about accepting this argument, for two reasons. Although Brasil and the United States share clear similarities over the course of the historical development of early child care and education, the two societies have different histories and different contemporary values, beliefs, resources, and so on. It is not necessarily the case that North-American results are applicable in South America. Second, Belsky’s position is highly controversial, even in the United States, primarily because he does not pay sufficient attention to issues of quality—both in the child-care center and in the home. One only has to read about the home situations of some Brasilian children, well documented by Lordelo and Moreira, Oliveira Lima, and Dos Santos and her colleagues, and those in Colombia, as discussed by Hormoza and her colleagues, to realize that even relatively low-quality child-care centers might be a better place for children to spend their times. Quality child care, as described by Lordelo and Moreira, is not only likely to be far better for children but also can have positive effects on the situation at home as well.

Another aspect of context that two of the chapters discussed was that of social class. Dos Santos and her colleagues wanted to distinguish between the effects of social class (or socioeconomic status, SES) and the types of everyday activities and interactions labeled “characteristics of the developmental environment” (MS p. 2) described earlier. Similarly, Hormoza and her colleagues aimed to show that it is too simplistic to assume that social class is
directly related to children’s cognitive development. Hormoza et al.’s data show that there is no clear link between SES and three- to five-year olds’ scores on tests of classification, and that knowing about the everyday activities and interactions between the children and their parents is more important than simply knowing their socioeconomic status.

However, from the theoretical position that I have laid out, one should not expect that social class, or any other aspect of context, should be a determinant of any outcome. It is true that researchers have often argued that class, race, ethnicity, or gender is related to some outcome of interest. However, if they are unable to specify the processes that translate between membership in some social grouping and the outcome of interest, they have explained nothing. The answer, at least from a contextualist position, is not to try to separate the independent effects of social class (or any other aspect of context) from the everyday activities and interactions of the families or groups concerned, but to see how they relate to one another. One of the important characteristics of contextualist theories, after all, is that development is thought of as an emergent property of the intersection of individual and contextual aspects via everyday activities and interactions. In other words, development cannot be explained by the simple addition of individual and context, but is a dialectical outcome resulting from the interplay of both.

The final aspect of the theory deals with individual characteristics. No matter how powerful are the influences on development of contextual factors (of historical period, culture, social class, race/ethnicity, etc.) development is never determined by any of these. Development is the result of individual transformations of the values, beliefs, and practices of the wider group of which those individuals are a part. Individuals never simply and passively imitate what members of their group do, or think, or believe; they are active participants in their group from the moment of birth, changing the groups into which they are born simply by their presence and,
in more complex ways, by the ways in which they act and interact with other members of those
groups.

This point is made strikingly clear in Lima Oliveira’s chapter. The setting is almost
indescribably awful, and yet somehow both Macabéa and her daughter, Maria de Jó, have
characteristics of quiet determination (described in some detail on pp. 18-19) to change their
environment, of forgiveness (at least on the part of Maria de Jó), and a way of presenting
themselves that encourages others to help them. Of course, as Bandura (2001) recognized,
development can often occur as it does because of purely fortuitous events or meetings; the
attorney that they visit, in their quest to get help to build a real house for themselves, is someone
who is both patient and empathic, taking the time to ask simple, but revealing, questions. If either
the characteristics of the mother and daughter, or those of the attorney, had been different, the
daughter’s development would have been entirely different. Context, alone, is insufficient to
explain development.

I think that the same argument can be made about the research reported by Dos Santos,
Hormoza, and their colleagues. The point made by both sets of authors is that “living in poverty”
or “being from a low SES background” is only a descriptor, or a “social address” (as
Bronfenbrenner, 1988, named it). Dos Santos and her colleagues focused on the families’
everyday practices, rather than on individual characteristics, and it is clear that these play the
crucial role in explaining children’s cognitive development, although maternal education is also
influential. Given that these everyday practices are not determined by social class, the mothers’
individual differences in providing appropriate play materials and responding well to the child
must be important. As the authors argued:
It can therefore be confirmed that the condition of poverty is not directly responsible for cognitive deficits in early childhood but that it is the absence of physical resources, either material or social, of parents who live in socio-economically disadvantaged situations which limits the stimulation of the child. (MS p. 18)

Hormoza and her colleagues, writing about the situation in Cali, Colombia, make the same argument about the limited influence of poverty *per se* on children’s ability to classify. In the case of their research, however, the generally low socioeconomic status of the families makes it impossible to assess accurately the extent to which social class might influence both family activities and interactions and the children’s cognitive development. The main argument that they make is a good one; even within a low-income sample in which all the parents were from the same cultural group and had originally migrated from the coastal region of Colombia there is a good deal of heterogeneity both of family interaction and child cognition. Clearly one cannot ignore the individual level to make sense of young children’s development in situations of poverty.

**Conclusion**

The authors of these five chapters, taken as a group, did an excellent job of examining the development of children and adolescents who are growing up in poverty. Several of them drew explicitly on one or other contextualist theory, but regardless of the theoretical underpinnings of their research, their findings effectively illustrate the importance of considering the key elements of any contextualist theory. Context clearly is important, whether context is treated as temporal context (the impact of growing up in any given historical period), spatial context (growing up in north-eastern Brasil or south-western Colombia), social context (culture, poverty, and ethnicity), or local context (home and child care). But context is not a determinant of development,
influential though it is. No matter how homogeneous the context might appear to be, families, teachers, and children deal with it in different ways, changing that context as a result. From any contextualist perspective, what the individual brings to the situation must always be taken into account. The active roles played by individuals in their own development in the course of transforming their own context can be seen most clearly in Oliveira Lima’s chapter, but is also apparent in the work of several of the other authors.

Individuals actively transform their own contexts in the course of their everyday activities and interactions—in the course of their play, their conversation, their work together, their disciplinary techniques. These are, of course, influenced not only by their own specific values, beliefs, and ideas but by the context in which they are situated; cultural groups share sets of values, beliefs, practices, and so on, and have greater or less access to resources, all of which influence parents’ personal ideas about how to raise children. Parents are also influenced by their children’s own characteristics: boys may be encouraged to do some things, girls another; those who are active and outgoing will be treated differently than those who are more passive and shy. In other words, everyday activities and interactions serve as the domain in which context and individual characteristics intersect. If we want to understand development, these typical practices must be central in our thinking. I thus applaud the authors of these chapters for paying so much attention to what is occurring within the homes or child-care centers of families living in poverty, and not simply viewing the condition of poverty as having some deterministic role in children’s developmental trajectories.
References


