

Difference in Families: Comparing Lower and Middle Socioeconomic Status

By:

Beth Simpson

University of TN at Chattanooga

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Dorothy Williams; Instructor

## Introduction

### *Problem*

The problem to be addressed is the disparity between activities and settings of those individuals in the lower class, compared to individuals who are part of the middle class. Because many disparities exist between the lower and middle socioeconomic classes, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem are all impacted accordingly. Alternatively, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem can impact socioeconomic status; thus, the relationship between socioeconomic status and the various systems is of a cyclical nature.

### *Statement of the Purpose of the Observation*

The purpose of the observation is to learn about the different activities in which people of both lower and middle class participate. In order to understand how the depth of these differences, it is important to observe the variations in microsystem elements across these social classes.

### *Hypothesis 1*

I suspect that, when compared to the individuals residing in the middle class setting, the individuals who are considered part of the lower socioeconomic class will spend less time engaging in joint activities with their lower socioeconomic counterparts.

### *Hypothesis 2*

The physical and material setting of the individuals who are a part of the lower socioeconomic strata will be considerably less desirable than those people who are considered part of the middle socioeconomic strata.

## Literature Review

### *Discussion of the Concept of Microsystem*

According to Urie Bronfenbrenner, the microsystem is the immediate setting that contains the developing person. More specifically, the "microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with a particular physical and material characteristics" (1979, p. 22).

According to Urie Bronfenbrenner, a molar activity is "an ongoing behavior possessing a momentum of its own and perceived as having meaning or intent by participants in the setting" (1979, p. 45). Bronfenbrenner states that a molar activity is a continuing process that entails more than a beginning or an end. Some examples of a molar activity are doing crossword puzzles, washing dishes, or mowing the lawn. A

molar activity is contrasted with an act, which can be described as instantaneous, such as a smile.

Bronfenbrenner, in his book entitled *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*, further continues with his definition of “role.” A role, according to Bronfenbrenner, is a “set of activities and relations expected of a person occupying a particular position in society and of others in relation to that person.” Bronfenbrenner states that roles are usually identified by the labels used to designate various social positions in culture (1979, p. 85). One example of a label used in society is the label of “mother.” A few traditional roles that mothers in today's culture have been assigned are feeding, care for, and protecting their children.

A relation, according to Bronfenbrenner, “obtains whenever one person in a setting pays attention to or participates in the activities of another.” A relation must be present, in both directions, in order to form a dyad. A dyad is the most basic interpersonal structure and sets the stage for more complex structures like triads and tetrads (1979, p. 56).

### *Discussion of Macrosystem*

Bronfenbrenner states that “a macrosystem refers to the consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems that exist, or could exist, at the level of ideology underlying such consistencies” (1979, p. 26). A macrosystem is related to culture, in that, it can pertain to religious ideologies or ethnic backgrounds that sometimes differentiate a specific group of people from another.

### *Discussion of the Properties of Social Class Which Define it as a Macrosystem*

According to Spence and Lee (2003), a macrosystem is the larger sociocultural context (e.g. social class structure, cultural values, community) in which a person resides” (p. 13). Because social class can not be described as an immediate setting which contains the developing person (for example, the home), it can not be defined as a microsystem. In addition, social class can not be defined as either a mesosystem or an exosystem as both refer to, in different ways, settings. Because social class is not tangible (in comparison to settings like the home or the workplace within the microsystem and exosystem), and because it is not related to the relationship between two or more settings that an individual actively participates in (as in the mesosystem), it is more appropriately placed in the macrosystem with other ideas (such as culture and ethnicity) which can be used in ways to distinguish groups of individuals from others.

### *Discussion of Influences of Social Class on Human Behavior and Development*

The impact of social class on human development and behavior is widespread. Foremost, individuals who suffer from a nutrient deficient diet because they can not afford well-balanced meals can endure health implications (Furstenburg, 2006, p. 6) and stunted physical development. Research conducted by Nelson and his colleagues

revealed that if a child received little or no opportunities to develop attachments with stable emotional figures, emotional development was damaged (2006, p. 7). Although this damage could be repaired (in some cases), it is important to remember that those children who live in an environment where their parents are not active participants, as a result of working long hours in low paying jobs (or other low socioeconomic implications), can suffer in terms of healthy emotional development. Furstenburg reports that criminology literature “provides ample evidence that class [sic] accounts for a huge amount of the variation in outcomes of delinquency” (2006, p. 11). The author further states that it isn't there are less offenses made by those of the middle and upper socioeconomic class, it is that those who are affluent have the financial means and social connections to minimize the consequences of their actions. In addition, in comparison to those of the lower socioeconomic strata, other individuals can afford interventions for problem behaviors like drinking or using illegal drugs (2006, p. 11-12).

## Methods

### *Discussion of the Variables That Will Be the Focus of the Observation*

In this observation, I will be examining activities, specifically dinnertime, as well as the material and physical characteristics of the home. The dependent variables of this observation are activities and material and physical characteristics of the setting. The independent variable in this observation is socioeconomic status.

### *Definition of Activities*

According to Bronfenbrenner, a molar activity is defined as, “ an ongoing behavior processing a momentum of its own and perceived as having meaning or intent by the participants in the setting” (1979, p. 45). Bronfenbrenner uses the word “molar” to describe a specific type of activity, that is, an activity which is a continuing process in contrast to an act, which Bronfenbrenner states is “perceived as instantaneous” (1979, p. 46).

### *Definition of Material Characteristics*

Material characteristics is defined as how a setting is furnished. For example, if one was to consider material characteristics of a home, they may look at the fabric on furniture or the condition of appliances.

### *Definition of Physical Characteristics*

The term “physical characteristics” relates to the architectural elements of a structure. Physical characteristics include room sizes and building materials.

### *Definition of Socioeconomic Status*

The independent variable, socioeconomic status, in this observation is defined as “an individual’s or group’s position within a hierarchical social structure. Socioeconomic status depends on a combination of variables, including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence,” according to *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (2002, p. 431).

### *Description of the Two Families to be Observed*

In this observation, I will be spending time with two families in an effort to compare and contrast the affects of socioeconomic status on a specific family activity (dinnertime) and to examine the differences of the physical and material characteristics of each setting. Two families, “Family A” and “Family B” will be observed.

“Family A” is a four person nuclear family of European origin. The mother, age 43, is married to her husband, age 45, both of whom live with their two children, a daughter (seven years of age), and a son (nine years of age). Although the mother did not receive her high school diploma, she did earn her GED and attended college and graduated with a two-year vocational degree. The father, a high school graduate, has not received any formal vocational training or attended college courses. Both the mother and the father of this family have full-time careers at a local insurance company.

“Family B” is also a four person nuclear family of European origin. The mother, age 37, is married to her husband, age 36, both of whom live with their two twins, a son and a daughter who are nine years old. Although both parents graduated high school, neither parent continued their education at a vocational or collegiate institution. The mother of “Family B” classifies herself as a “homemaker and a caretaker” as she is currently unemployed. The father works a full-time position as supervisor in a factory.

### *Operational Definition of Lower Socioeconomic Class*

The total family income will be used to determine membership in the lower socioeconomic stratum. The 2007 poverty index of the United States, which uses income only, will be used to determine lower socioeconomic status. This index is based on family size. For this project, lower socioeconomic status for a family of four with two children below 18 is \$20,650 annually. A family of four with a total yearly income that exceeds this amount will be excluded.

### *Operational Definition of Middle Socioeconomic Stratum*

As Cashell reports, “there is no true consensus definition of middle class, nor is there a governmental definition” (2007, p. 1). Therefore, for the purposes of this observation, I will use the 2005 Census Bureau’s numerical data, which separates United States households’ income distribution into quintiles. The middle quintile includes those families who earns \$36,000 to \$57,660 annually (2007, p. 2). A family of four with a total yearly income that doesn’t meet or exceeds this amount will be excluded.

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