

Empowerment and Agency in Advocacy

ECAY4003

2023

Agency



Agency

- Have you heard of the term agency before?
- In what context?
- What do you understand it to mean?



Agency

- In the field of Advocacy (and other supportive / caring services) agency has a very specific meaning:
 - Scholars argue that agency refers to a feeling (Self agency) that ones projected action controls an external event.
 - Giving a feeling of control and power over the consequences of the action.
 - If a person has agency then they feel able to take action, a person without agency will feel (and therefore be helpless)

(Chambon, Sidarus, and Haggard, 2014)





Agency as a sense of Judgement

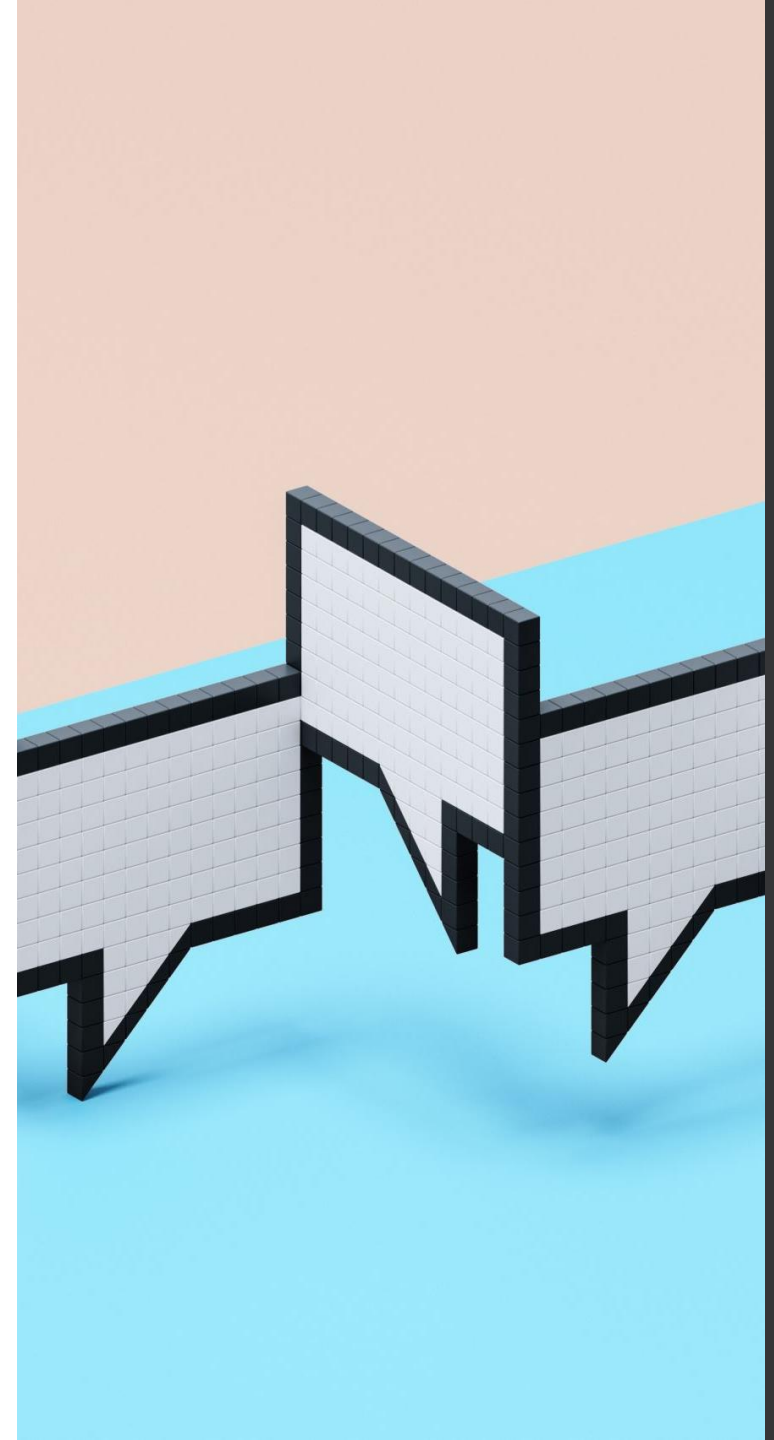
- Agency refers to the feeling of being in the driving seat when it comes to our actions and promotes a feeling of 'being in charge' (Moore, 2016).
- If it has a wider meaning, it is to draw attention to the psychological and social psychological make-up of the actor, and to imply the capacity for willed (voluntary) action (Scott and Marshall, 2009)
- This can be highlighted by risk-takers and gamblers who relate feelings of an exaggerated and a false judgement of reality (i.e. they believe that they can change their luck) (Henslin, 1967 *cited in* Moore, 2016).

‘The term agency is often juxtaposed to structure and is often no more than a synonym for action, emphasizing implicitly the undetermined nature of human action, as opposed to the alleged determinism of structural theories. If it has a wider meaning, it is to draw attention to the psychological and social psychological make-up of the actor, and to imply the capacity for willed (voluntary) action’.

(Scott and Marshall, 2009)

Agency V Structure

- The previous quote talks about ‘**agency**’ being juxtaposed with ‘**structure**’.
- It is important that, as well as understanding the concept of agency we understand what is meant by structure.
- In the context of Advocacy what do you think these two terms mean?
- **Juxtaposed:** place or deal with close together for contrasting effect





Agency V Structure

- Put simply (although there is a danger in doing this) ‘agency’ relates to people’s ability to take decisions and then act on them
- ‘Structure’ is commonly taken to mean aspects of society that place constraints on an individual’s ‘agency’
- Thus, ‘structure’ relates to values, norms, rules and laws that might impinge on individual freedoms of action

(Bourdieu, 1997)

Agency

- ‘It seems, often as if the sociologists use ‘agency’ as a placeholder for some vague sense of human freedom or individual volition within a broader model’. (Hitlin & Elder, 2007)
- The interaction between the individual and social structures is a complex one and most social theorists and this relationship has been described as ‘the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act’. (Ahearn, 2001)
- What are these quotes telling us?



Task

- Why do you think that the concept of agency is so important in the field of advocacy?
- Create a Mind Map as a group to demonstrate your understanding of agency and its importance.



A close-up photograph of four hands of different skin tones (light, medium, and dark brown) stacked together in a supportive grip. The hands are positioned in a way that suggests strength and unity. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

Empowerment

Empowerment

- Have you heard of the term empowerment before?
- In what context?
- What do you understand it to mean?



Empowerment

- The concept of empowerment is closely linked to that of agency
- It involves approaches used to 'help clients gain power of decisions and action over their own lives'.
- Wilks (2012) argues that empowerment is both an aspiration and a process.
 - What does Wilks mean?

(Payne, 2005)





Forms of Empowerment

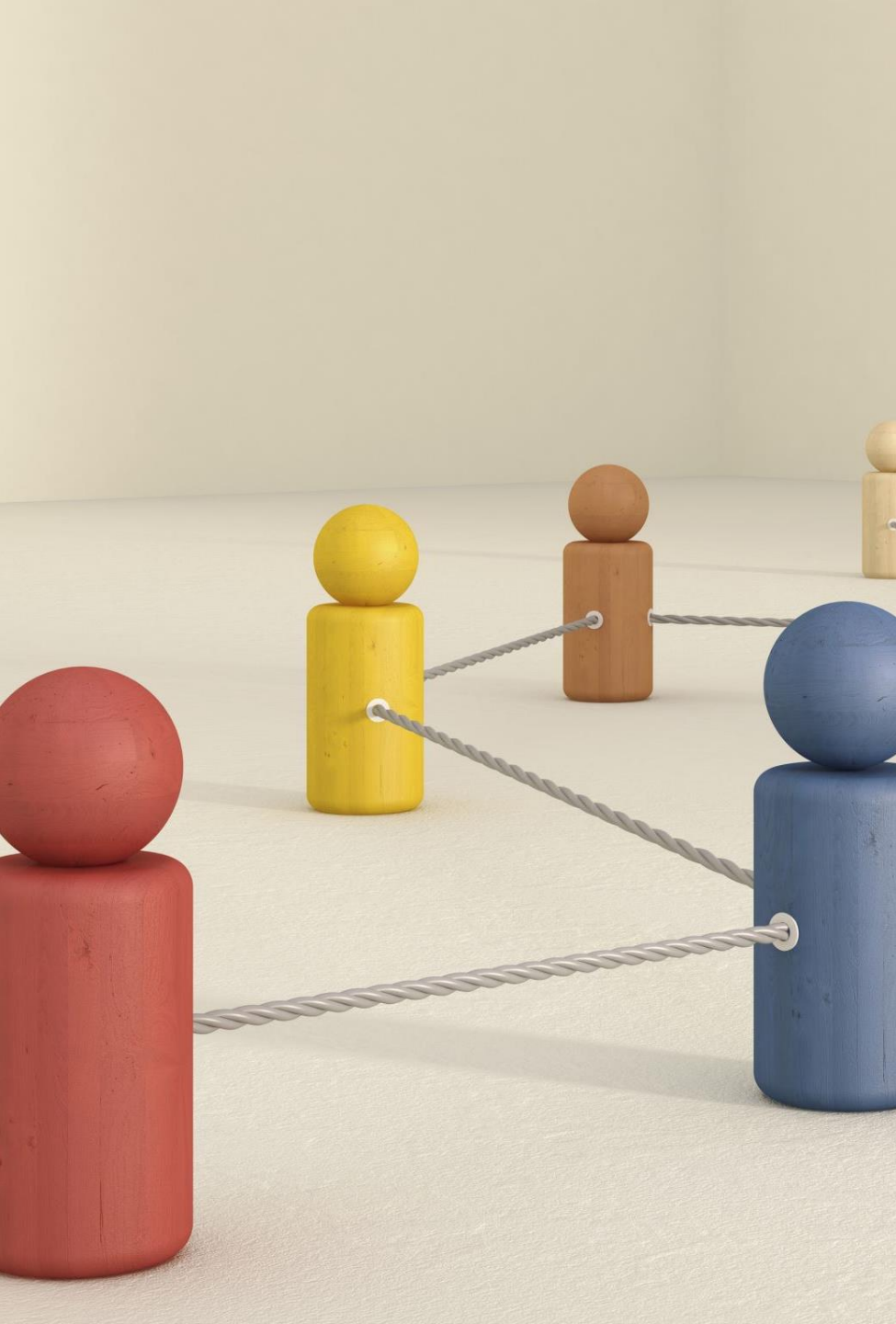
- Wilks goes on to argue that there are two forms of empowerment
- **Structural empowerment** – the removal of barriers which prevent access to material benefits
- **Psychological empowerment** – improving levels of confidence, self-esteem – often produced by access to material benefits but will also be influenced by emotion

(Wilks, 2012)

The use of Empowerment in Advocacy

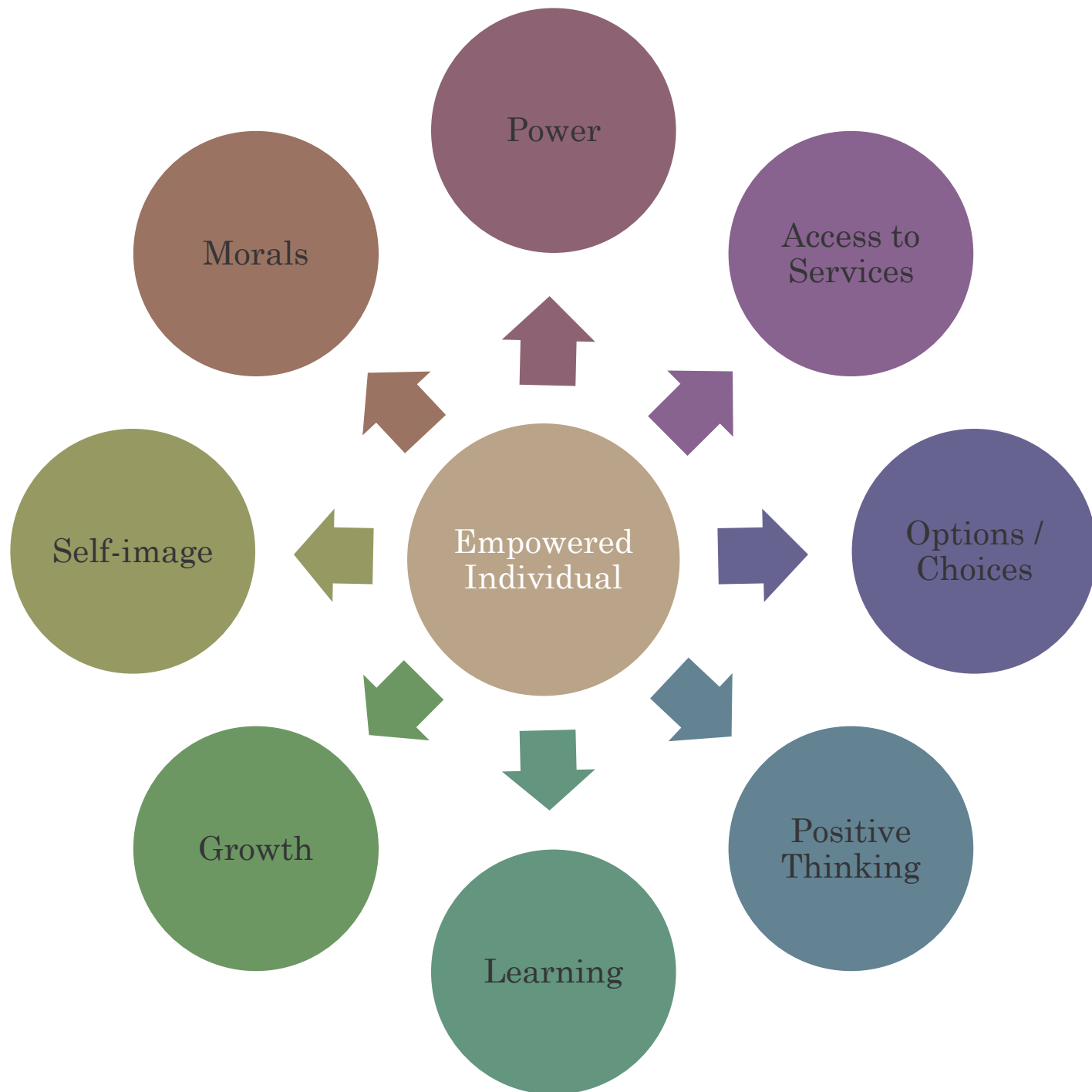
- ‘The empowerment process resides in the person not the helper’
- (Lee, 1994, p.13 *cited in Lishman, 2007, p.272*).
- This statement indicates the role of the advocate.
- In an ideal world the Advocate will support their client to becoming self empowered.
- Primarily, the service user remains the main actor and retains ownership of the process of advocacy.
- Thus becoming the final sequence in the advocacy engagement.





Empowerment

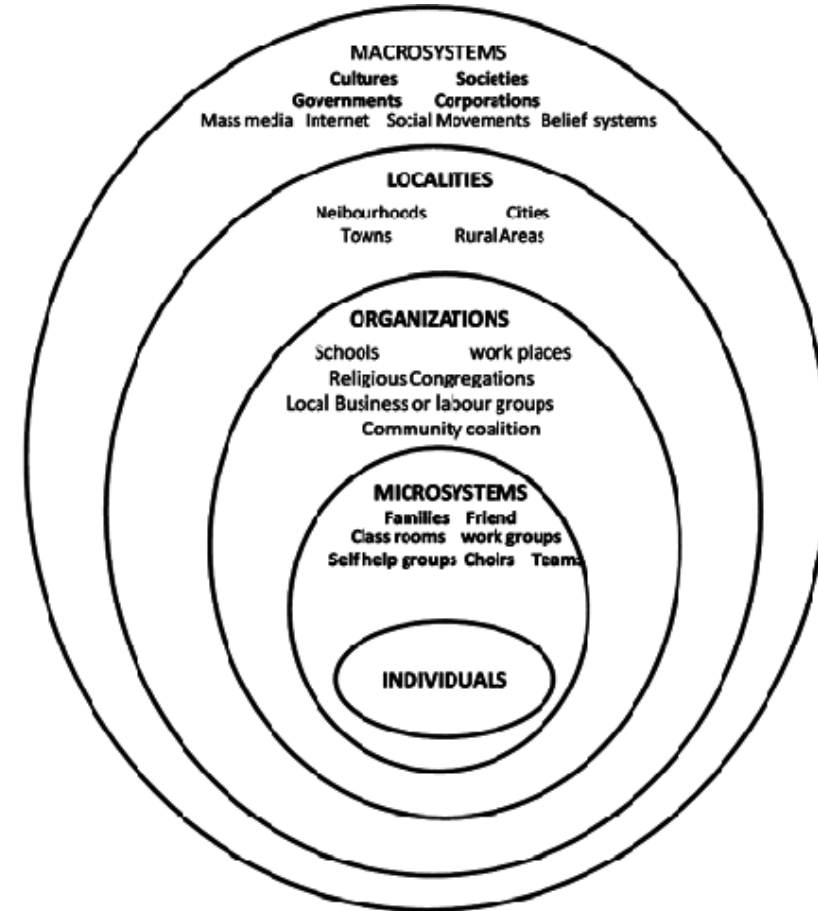
- Empowerment as a concept is related to the position of self in society and can be represented by many definitions and meanings as diversions in social economic contexts (Ibrham, and Alkire2007).
- As have seen, empowerment involves the psychological strengths of the individual and their ability to deal with the 'structures' of society
- But what does this look like?



A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a row of old, leather-bound books. The spines of the books are visible, showing various textures and gold-tooled patterns. The lighting is warm and focused on the central books, with the background books fading into a soft blur.

Empowerment Theory

Ecological Systems Theory: Bronfenbrenner (1977)



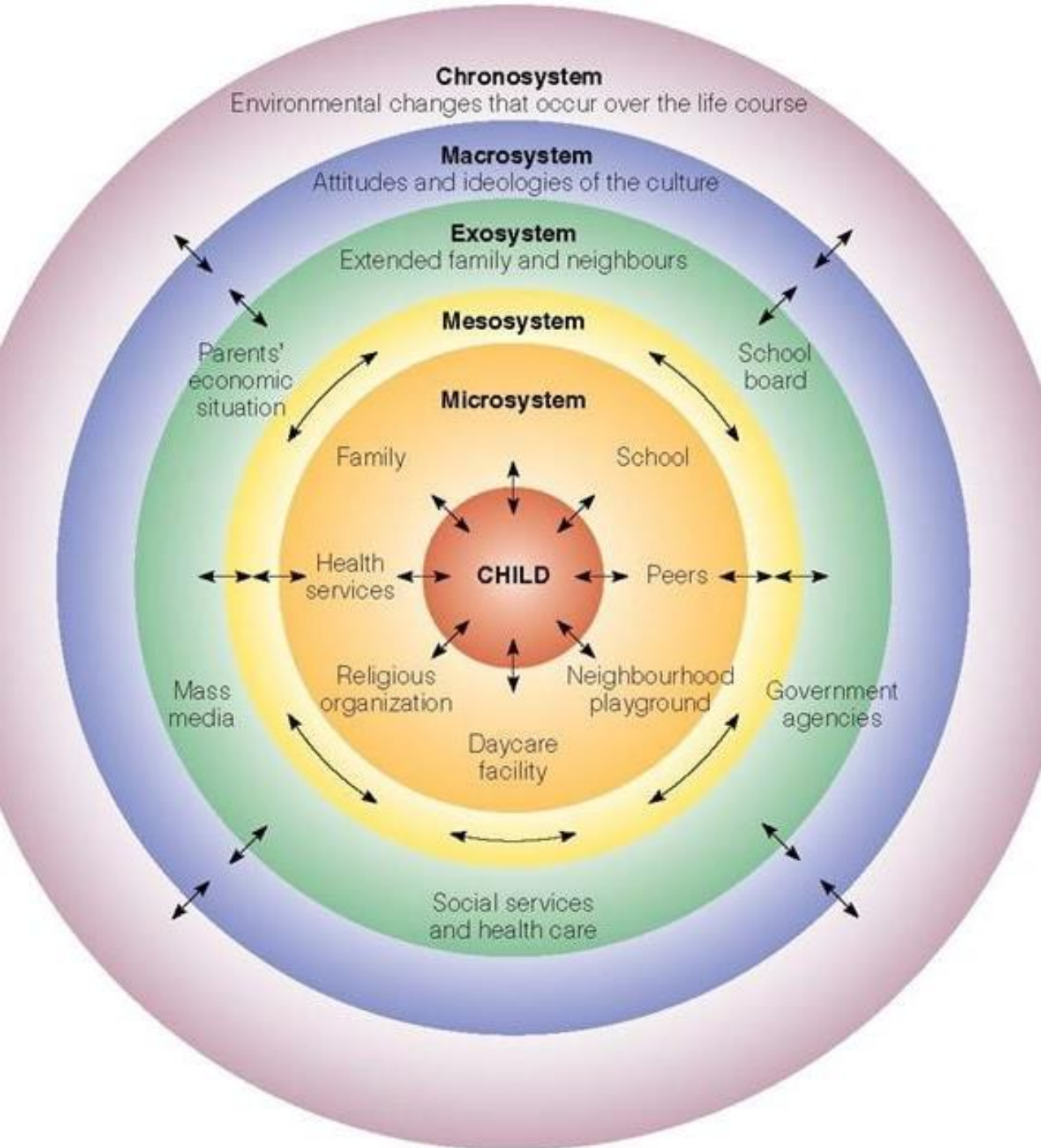
Ecological Systems Theory: Bronfenbrenner (1977)

- American Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner formulated the Ecological Systems Theory to explain how social environments affect a child's development.
- This theory emphasises the importance of studying children in multiple environments, known as ecological systems, in the attempt to understand development.
- The same theory can be applied to oppressed groups and empowerment.

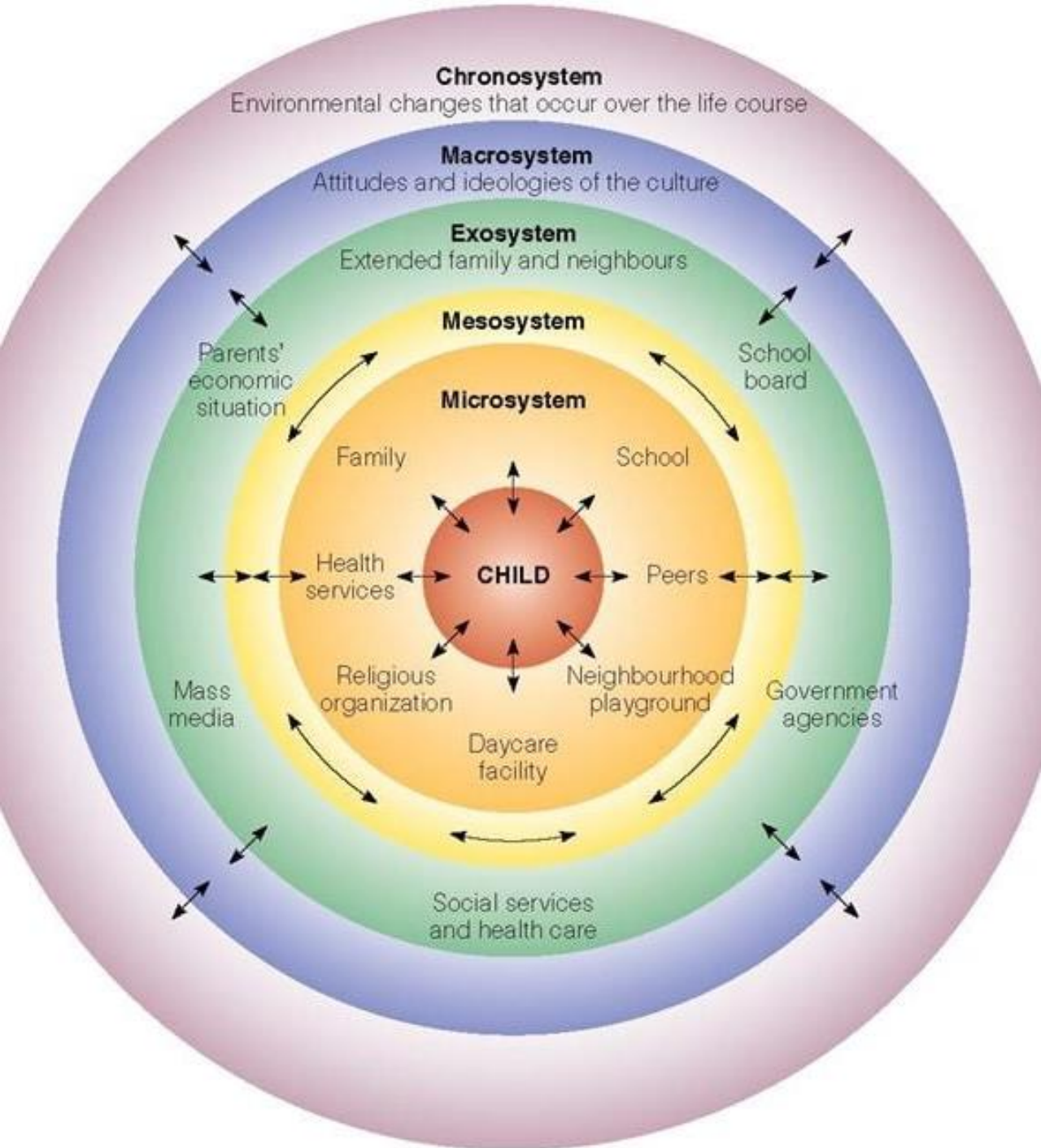




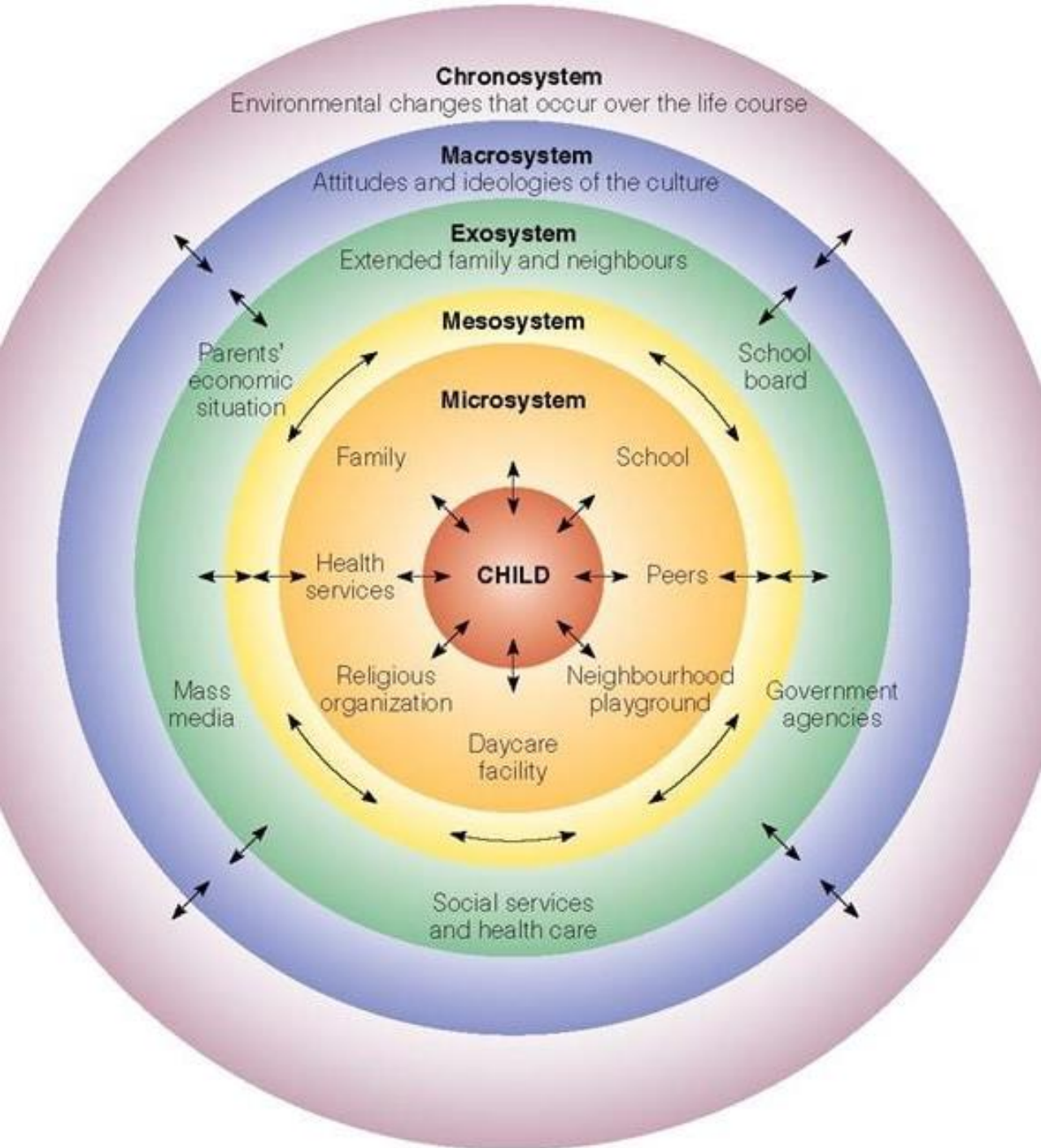
- At the center you always have the individual. In the original concept, this was the child, however, adaptations to this model now include the individual.
- The **microsystem/ interpersonal** is the smallest and most immediate environment in which a person lives, this includes:
 - The home
 - School/work
 - Peer group
 - Community environment
- Interactions within the microsystem typically involve personal relationships with family members, school friends/ work colleagues, teachers and care givers.
- How these groups/ individuals interact with the individual will affect how they develop.
- More nurturing and supportive interactions and relationships will likely foster a better environment for development.



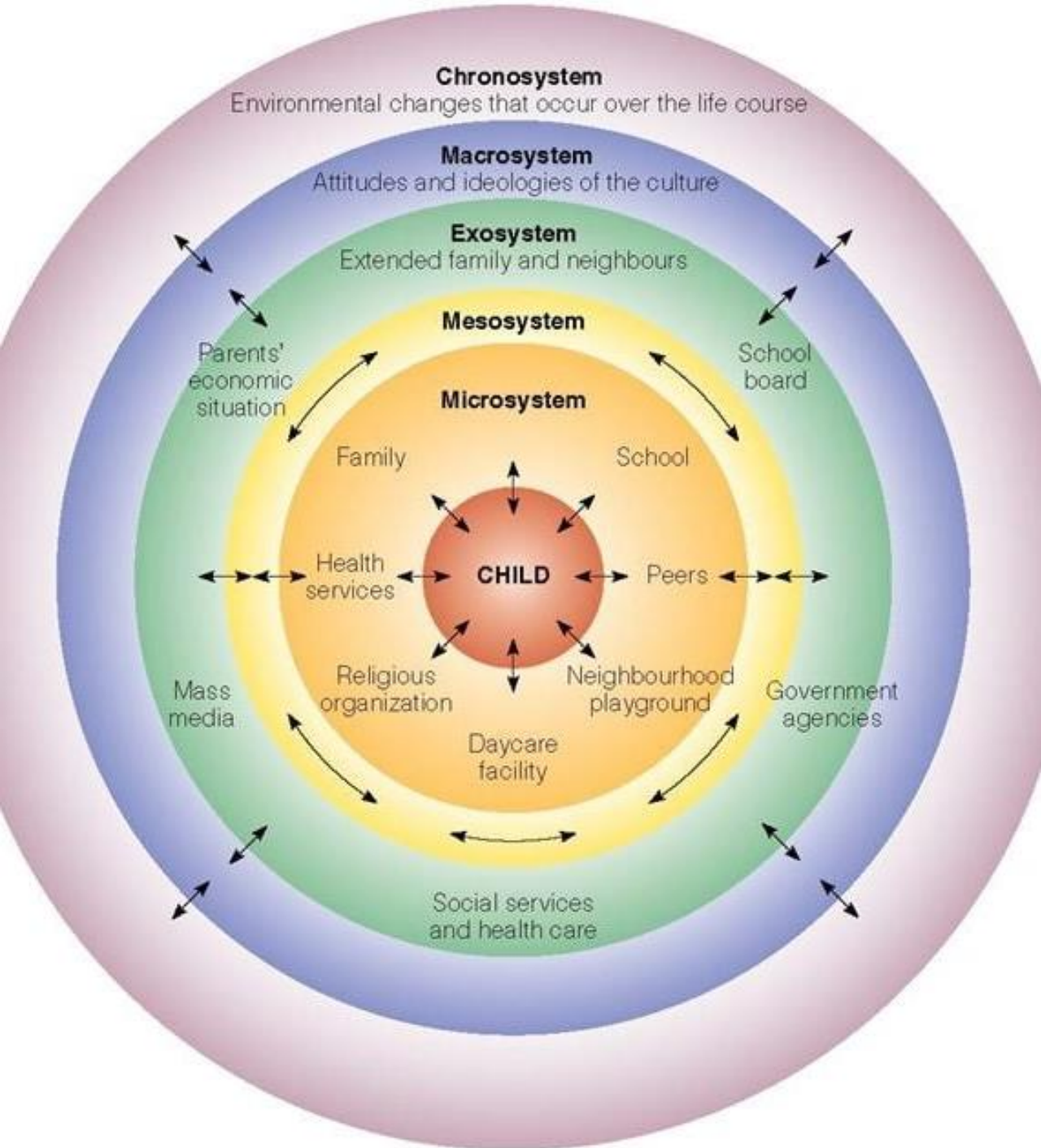
- The **Mesosystem/ community** encompasses the interaction of the different microsystems which individuals find themselves in.
- It is as such a system of microsystems and as such, involves linkages between home and school/work/organizations, peer groups and family and between family and community.
- An example:
 - If a child's parents are actively involved in a friendship of their child, for example they invite their child's friend over to their house from time to time and spend time with them, the child's development is affected positively through harmony and like-mindedness.
 - However, if the child's parents dislike their child's peers and openly criticize them, the child will experience disequilibrium and conflicting emotions, which will likely lead to negative development.



- The **Exosystem** pertains to the linkages that may exist between two or more settings, one of which may not contain the developing children/ individual but affect them indirectly.
- People and places that children may not directly interact with may still have an impact on their lives.
- Such places may include parent's workplaces, extended family members, and the neighborhood that they live in.
- For Example:
 - A father who is continuously passed up for promotion by an indifferent boss at the workplace may take it out on his children and mistreat them at home.
 - That will have a negative impact on the child's development.



- The **Macrosystem** is the largest and most distant collection of people and places to the children/ individual that still have significant influences on them.
- This ecological system is composed of the children's cultural patterns and values, specifically their dominant beliefs and ideas, as well as political and economic systems.
- For Example:
 - Children in war-torn areas will experience a different kind of development than children in a peaceful environment.



- The **Chronosystem** adds the useful dimension of time.
- It demonstrates the influence of both change and constancy in the children's environments.
- The Chronosystem may include a change in:
 - Family Structure
 - Address
 - Parent's employment status
 - Society changes (Economic cycles and wars)

Ecological Systems Theory: Bronfenbrenner (1977)

- Through various ecological systems, Bronfenbrenner's theory demonstrates the diversity of interrelated influences on child development.
- Awareness of the contexts that children/ individuals are in can sensitize us to variations in the way children/individuals may act in different settings.
- Can you think of any examples that support this theory?





Power

- One further consideration when discussing the concept of empowerment is that we are usually talking of a situation where ‘power’ is not evenly distributed
- Wilks (2012) makes the point that practitioners and the organisations they work for can be very ‘powerful’
- Thus the way in which that **power** is exercised can positively or negatively affect the experience of service users



Facets of Empowerment

- Many academics see empowerment as an increase in power and as a measure of control / ability to affect change (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007).
- ‘Empowerment, is the extent to which some categories of people are able to control their own destinies, even when their interests are opposed by those of other people, with whom they interact’ (Mason and Smith 2003 *cited in* Ibrahim and Alkire 2007).
- ‘Empowerment Is a multifaceted idea meaning different things to different people. It has academic, rhetorical and radical associations towards it’ (Adams 2008, p.1).

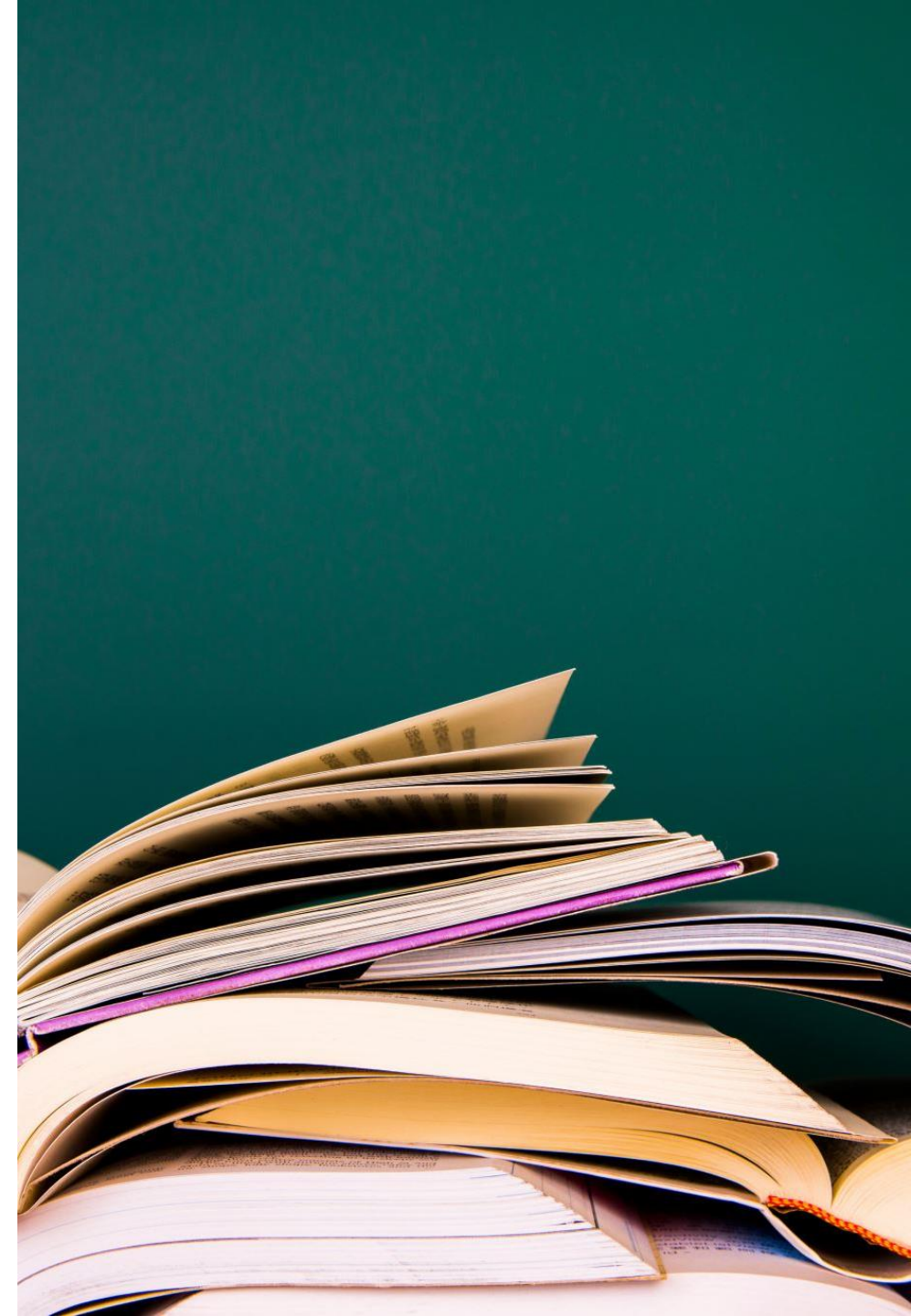
Further Reading

- In our next taught session, we will be exploring Unconditional Positive regard.
- To prepare for this I would like you to think about the emotional aspects of seeking help.

Often people seeking support from an advocate will be in a position of real or perceived powerlessness

What might a person be feeling?

What can an advocate do to address this?



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