Invitations for development – examining the invitational character of the environment and its implications for developmental processes

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Today a lot of emphasis and political awareness is placed on ensuring learning outcomes and desired development; be this in kindergartens, schools or in social-psychiatric institutions, just to exemplify. However, in our understandings of these institutional settings and the spaces for development that they constitute, the environment, as a concrete material practice, often becomes obscure or even non-existent in terms of analysis. This presents a challenge as to how to employ theoretical concepts that bridges the gap between what is often separated or analysed apart; namely persons and the environment.

Often the study of development tends to adopt an individual focus, while at the same time institutional settings are often considered ‘similar’ and thus become blurry in terms of analysis; both tendencies adding to a reduction of complexity. However, we must not forget that developmental processes are facilitated, shaped, and realized in relation to concrete cultural, relational and physical-material surroundings, and especially the latter has a tendency to fall in the background when we try to explain or study development.

If we wish to move beyond an analysis of the person as an isolated entity, we need concepts that enable us to examine variations on an institutional level, as well as connecting these variations to the concrete developmental possibilities for the person. This presentation will explore the potential of the concepts from within ecological psychology for this purpose.

With its emphasis on the person-environment reciprocity, ecological psychology may offer valuable insights in relation to situating persons in concrete material surroundings. Gibson’s notion of affordances along with Baker & Wright’s notion of behavior setting allow for an analytical gaze that insists on regarding persons as entangled and co-constituted with and by their concrete surroundings, which implies that to properly understand developmental processes in dynamic terms, one needs to adopt a principle of reciprocity. I will thus argue that adopting an analytical focus on the invitational character of the environment may serve as a productive contribution in the study, understanding and co-creation of developmental processes.

*Keywords: ecological psychology, development, reciprocity*