There are few edited volumes, in my experience, that merit the sort of attention this thought-provoking book does. While the average edited volume makes a contribution by bringing together a variety of viewpoints on an issue with which scholars are grappling, *Chaos and Its Influence on Children’s Development: An Ecological Perspective*, edited by Evans and Wachs, does much more than this and belongs in the library of researchers from many fields interested in child development. It brings increasing clarity to an inchoate field of research and significantly sharpens the challenging theoretical questions that must be tackled; at the same time, the book provides the reader new to this work with a well-selected series of chapters written by scholars from a variety of disciplines, just as one would expect when the topic is so clearly interdisciplinary in nature.

The study of chaos in the lives of children is not a new field, and in their introductory chapter Wachs and Evans give a succinct overview of the emergence of thinking about chaos and development. They begin, as one would expect, by grappling with the definition of chaos but resist the temptation to provide a canned definition. Certainly, overstimulation is a part of what chaos is, and the field can probably be most readily traced to the pioneering work of Joachim Wohlwill, whose work helped define the optimal stimulation model, in which both very low and very high levels of stimulation are posited to produce negative developmental outcomes (think noise levels and crowding).

The editors add several other elements, such as instability (e.g., family instability, changes in day care providers, or residential mobility) and lack of predictability (absence of family routines and rituals). Many potential sources of chaos are implicated in the various chapters in the volume, including parental maladjustment, inconsistent parental and institutional disciplinary practices, disorganized classrooms, economic uncertainty and change, and so forth. Future research and theory development, the editors note, will have to discern which of these actually define chaos and which are the result of chaotic features of developmental settings. Certainly chaos can beget further chaos, but a theory of chaos will need to grapple further with the issue of the major dimensions defining chaos that have developmental implications.

The volume, and much of the theorizing in it, is built around Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This model, familiar to developmental psychologists, is composed of four components (process, person, context, time); while the editors describe the relevance of each of these components to their thinking about chaos, the main focus in this volume is on the role of context, which Bronfenbrenner divided into four systems.

*Microsystems* are those immediate settings inhabited by individuals (classrooms, playgrounds, homes, etc.). The *mesosystem* context describes the influence that microsystems have on other microsystems (i.e., chaos in the neighborhood influencing what occurs in the home). *Exosystems* are microsystems that do not contain the focal child but
nevertheless shape processes affecting the child’s development (parents’ workplaces affecting their educational aspirations for their child). Macrosystems refer to those large-scale and distal political, economic, and cultural forces that in turn influence the nature of the micro-, meso-, and exosystems and the processes that take place in them. The authors of the chapters in this volume use this framework to guide their presentations.

**Chaos in Context**

The first of these sections covers chaos at the microsystem level, with four chapters covering different microsystems that researchers have argued are fundamental contexts for child development: the home, the family, child care settings, and school environments. One could imagine other important settings, especially as children move into adolescence, but these four certainly warrant the attention provided by these reviews.

The chapter on the dynamics of family chaos, by Barbara Fiese and Marcia Winter, is a particularly good exemplar of the utility of Bronfenbrenner’s model to the conceptualization of the influence of chaos in childhood. The central focus of the authors is on the importance of time, specifically on the important ways in which parental (or caretaker) time, and the allocation of that time, shapes family functioning in ways that reduce or promote family chaos.

Fiese, a central contributor to research in this area, and her colleague Winter provide an exceptionally thoughtful summary of the ways in which diverse families struggle to manage family time, the uses they make of such time, the importance of family routines for children’s development, and the impact of family instability on family time and family routines. Chaos, they note, is itself not a stable phenomenon, and families appear to cycle in and out of chaotic states. Studies seem to indicate that family routines often buffer families when chaos begins to increase.

Fiese and Winter conclude their chapter with a thoughtful discussion of the possible mechanisms by which family chaos might negatively influence child development. Chaos, they argue, directly affects parenting practices (increased inconsistency, parental withdrawal, and use of harsh discipline) and may also function as a mediator between parental economic strain, for example, and externalizing behavior among boys. Two additional chapters in this section delve more deeply into the utility of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological lens, especially with its focus on person and process, and the important role potentially played by temporal and spatial instability in affecting child well-being.

Mesosystem chaos is covered by two chapters, the first examining linkages between home and day care and the second between home and neighborhood. Studying chaos at the mesosystem level is clearly more challenging than doing so within a single microsystem, and the authors of these chapters, although able to summarize research of the individual microsystems of home, child care, and neighborhood, are faced with a more challenging task when attempting to discuss how, for example, the nexus between home and day care microsystems affects child development. The authors give very sound counsel to readers about the most promising avenues for future research, but the existing body of work looking at these mesosystems is quite modest.

Two exosystems are described in the next set of chapters: neighborhoods and parental employment settings. The Bronfenbrenner framework can get a bit confusing at times, as particular contexts, such as neighborhoods, can be both microsystems (when the child is actually engaged directly with the neighborhood) and exosystems (when the child is not).

The chapter addressing neighborhood chaos here looks at the latter situation, attempting to provide a framework for thinking about how best to conceptualize neighborhood chaos and how to think about the processes by which such chaos would indirectly influence the child’s well-being. The chapter on parental employment takes a somewhat similar approach, and both succeed in giving the reader many hypotheses worthy of exploration.

The final major section of the volume focuses on three topics: culture, poverty and socioeconomic status, and the refugee experience. The first chapter, by anthropologist Tom Weisner, begins with a challenge to Bronfenbrenner’s nested contextual model. As Weisner argues, this approach places culture far from the microsystems of everyday life. In contrast, Weisner argues that cultural models, scripts, and values very directly shape the regularities of what takes place in all the microsystems central to children’s lives and help explain why microsystems serving similar functions
often take very different forms in differing cultures and may also affect the extent to which those microsystems are vulnerable to the effects of chaos.

Weisner also urges the reader to think about the contrast to chaos as well as about the nature of chaos. Like Fiese, Weisner stresses the important routines of daily life, suggesting that these routines, when meaningful, sustained, and actively engaged in, are the material of positive development. Understanding these routines and their role in preventing or mitigating chaos is worthy of greater attention.

All good edited volumes end with a chapter tying matters together and providing an agenda for the future. Arnold Sameroff succeeds in this role, not by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the preceding chapters, but by reframing the key empirical and theoretical issues raised within the main developmental models used by theorists and by posing more questions than answers for the reader.

Chaos is not yet a central topic of study or theorizing within developmental psychology, but this volume brings the field closer to that status.

References
