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The Social Construction of Ecocultural Niches: Family Accommodation of Developmentally Delayed Children

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Family ecology theories mislead if they omit a social constructivist perspective. Parents construct an everyday routine to accommodate values and goals and resources and constraints of their proximal and distal ecology. Ecocultural theory suggests that (a) the most powerful ecocultural features affect everyday routines, (b) whether ecocultural features are positive or negative is influenced by family-constructed themes, (c) "sustainability" of everyday activities is a better predictor of child and family outcome than is measured "stimulation level," and (d) comparative studies should include families engaged in different kinds of social construction processes, not only samples matched on child age or developmental level.

The psychological world in which we conduct research is, in my view, a cloud of correlated events to which we as human observers give meaning. In the swirling cloud of interacting organisms and environments, most events merely co-occur. As investigators, we construct a story (often called a "theory") about relations among events. . . . Because we *do* construct science and reality, we might as well give it some breadth, depth, and some excitement (Scarr, 1985, pp. 502, 511).

Social scientists are not alone in the search for meaning in the "relations among events." Families do the same when they seek meaning and structure in their lives, using the tools of their sociocultural time and place (Farber, 1986). This point can be extended to the families of mentally retarded and developmentally delayed children. Like all families, they have the task of constructing routines that sustain coherent and satisfying daily activities.

Crnic, Friedrich, and Greenberg (1983) concluded that no theory presently "exists through which one can develop an empirical understanding of families of retarded children. Rather, investigators have seemed to rally around the concept of anticipated pathology in these families" (p. 126). More recently, some researchers have turned from pathology theories to ecological conceptions of family adaptation (e.g., Nihira, Mink, & Meyers, 1985; Turnbull, Summers, & Brotherson, 1986). For example, Crnic et al. (1983) have proposed Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology theory as a basis for a more comprehensive analysis of developmentally delayed children and their families. Bronfenbrenner's model is a Lewin-type "circles of influence" approach and emphasizes the interrelatedness and complexity of social–ecological influences on the family. One of its strengths is its insistence on the interconnectedness of proximal family and child care features with distal events (national economic policies, bureaucratic regulations, and so on).

However, the very comprehensiveness of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) and similar approaches has created a formidable challenge: If everything is plausibly connected to everything else, how should the different levels or units of analysis be organized? There is no criterion for choosing variables or features to include and exclude at each ecological "circle" and no principled basis for ordering ecological features in terms of their hypothesized relative effects on childcare and children.

An alternative, which we call "ecocultural theory," is derived from the psychocultural model developed by Whiting, Whiting, and their colleagues (Munroe, Munroe, & Whiting, 1981; LeVine, 1977; Nerlove & Snipper, 1981; Super & Harkness, 1980, 1986; Weisner, 1984; Weisner & Gallimore, 1985; J. Whiting & Whiting, 1975; B. Whiting, 1976; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Combined with emergent theories of cultural activity (Cole, 1985; Levine, Schneider, Haney, & Hall, 1987; Rogoff, 1982; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Schneider & Gearhart, 1988; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1985), ecocultural theory offers a solution to the unit of analysis problem that has limited the usefulness of Lewin-circle models.

In the following pages, we briefly describe our version of ecocultural theory and illustrate its applications using case materials from a study of families with developmentally delayed children (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1982, 1988; Gallimore et al., 1983; Gallimore, Levine, Hecht, Keogh, & Bernheimer, 1984).

An Overview of Ecocultural Theory

Activity Setting Concept

Ecocultural theory proposes that ecological effects are mediated through the *activity settings* of the daily routine (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Weisner & Gallimore, 1985). Activity settings provide opportunities for children to learn and develop through modeling, joint participation, task engagement, and other forms of mediated social learning that are embedded in goal-directed interactions (Rogoff, 1982; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Weisner, 1984; Weisner & Gallimore, 1985; Wertsch, Minick, & Arns, 1984; B. Whiting, 1980; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Children's activity settings are the architecture of everyday life, not a deliberate curriculum; they are homely and familiar parts of a family's day: preparing meals, eating dinner, clearing up, and dozens of mundane settings in which adult–child interaction is embedded. They can also be deliberate teaching opportunities; for example, many families (with and without developmentally delayed children) create storybook times and other activities for the express purpose of promoting cognitive and linguistic development.

Activity settings are composed of five components: who is present, their values and goals, what tasks are being performed, why are they being performed (the motives and feelings surrounding action), and what scripts govern interactions, including those that shape and constrain the child's participation. These components—reflected in who is present with a child and what they are doing (and why)—are a perceptible *instantiation of ecology and culture*.

This brings us back to the unit of analysis problem that has limited ecological "circle" theories. Activity setting, as a unit of analysis, offers a criterion for the selection of ecological variables that potentially influence childcare and child development. Ecological variables can be selected and hierarchically ordered based on their hypothesized or demonstrated effects on the five measurable components of activity settings (i.e., personnel present, values, purposes, tasks, and scripts). This selection and ordering criterion offers a solution to some of the difficulties of Lewin-type models, permitting development of hypotheses about the relative influence of differing ecological influences.

The Ecocultural Niche

The *ecocultural niche* (Super & Harkness, 1980, 1986) reflected in parents' accounts of their daily routines refers to more than is implied in Lewin-circle models. The niche is also more than "proximal home environment." Ecocultural theory construes families as more than hapless victims of implacable social and economic forces. Although they are strongly affected by these forces, *families take individual and collective action to modify and counteract them*. From this mix of forces and actions, families construct their ecocultural niches.

Thus, a family's econiche reflects *material*

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ecology as traditionally defined (e.g., income, public health conditions, housing and space, transportation, and distance from relatives or services). The niche is also influenced by cultural features that human beings use to understand and organize their everyday lives (e.g., beliefs and goals relating to the good and moral life, the origins and causes of handicaps, and the culturally appropriate conduct of marriage and family relationships).

This means the ecocultural niche—manifested in the everyday routine and its constituent activity settings—is not static: it is changing at two levels. First, the socioeconomic constraints and resources of the niche have evolved and continue to evolve through a broadly cultural–historical process beyond the control of individual households. Second, at the household level the niche is also changing and being shaped as a result of *family accommodation*.

Family Accommodation Process

Accommodation refers to the proactive, social construction actions of the family to adapt, exploit, counterbalance, and react to many competing, and sometimes contradictory, forces: income needs, health and mortality threats, resource allocation choices, domestic workload, marital role attitudes and relationships, parental assessments of a child's developmental future, emergent child development goals, and parental aspirations. Accommodative efforts are often unconscious, and the forces that drive them may be only dimly perceived by parents; yet, as we will show in the excerpts presented in this paper, the process is reflected again and again in our informants' accounts.

Although most people have little direct control over their broader economic and social ecology, the accommodation process gives parents a way to influence how these forces affect their families. Guided by their cultural and personal values and goals, they create activity settings that mitigate and shape the effects of the broader ecology. In varying degrees, they influence who their children are with, what they are doing, and how tasks are managed. Hence, the study of activity settings, and the econiche from which they arise, can begin with parents' accounts of their daily routines. As they describe their accommodations, the alternatives they considered, and what trade offs and compromises were made to achieve a stable daily routine, parents are revealing how they have socially constructed the *ecocultural niche of their family*.

APPLICATION OF ECOCULTURAL THEORY TO FAMILIES OF DEVELOPMENTALLY DELAYED CHILDREN

Method

Sample

Our in-progress study focuses on families with a young child who exhibits developmental delays *of unknown or uncertain cause* (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1982, 1986, 1988; Gallimore et. al., 1983; Gallimore et. al., 1984). Crnic et al. (1983) recommended longitudinal studies, such as ours, that commence from the time families discover their child is retarded. However, many mildly and moderately retarded children are not identified early, or at a specific point in time, as is often the case with more severely impaired youngsters. Although we cannot claim to have studied families from the "moment" their child was identified, we assembled a cohort in which identification had just begun.

We recruited 103 children (58.3% boys) from 102 families. In all cases, the etiology and prognosis were unknown or uncertain. Children were excluded from the sample if they were known to have chromosomal abnormalities and/or genetic conditions associated with mental retardation or if the delay was associated with either known prenatal drug or alcohol use or with postnatal neglect or abuse. At entry, the children's mean chronological age (CA) was 41.8 months (standard deviation [*SD*] = 6.2, range = 32 to 55). Their mean Gesell developmental quotient was 72.32 (*SD* = 15.97, range 38 to 117). All but 18 of the children had developmental quotients below 90, and all 103 had significant delays in one or more areas (motor, speech, behavior, or cognition) in spite of some relatively high developmental quotients.

Seventy-three agencies in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area assisted in the assembly of our cohort, called the CHILD cohort. Public schools and private intervention programs constituted two thirds of the agencies. A total of 313 children were reviewed or discussed for entry into the cohort. Of that figure, 103 were entered on the basis that they matched our sampling criteria and the parents consented to participate. About 5% of all the 313 children we considered met our sampling criteria, but either an agency "selected them out," or the parents declined to participate. This suggests that selection bias is present in the cohort but at an acceptable level of 5%.

The 102 families in our study cohort consist predominantly of married couples in their 30s in middle-class circumstances; however, there is a wide range of variation and heterogeneity surrounding this central tendency, as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1
Statistical Description of Cohort Characteristics

Characteristic	%
Marital status	
Married & living independently	78.6
Mothers living independently[a]	10.7
Other circumstances[b]	10.7
Single parent households	19.4
Age of mother	
< 24	4.9
between 25 and 34	63.1
between 35 and 40	25.2
41 >	3.9
Unknown	2.9
Age of father	
< 24	2.9
between 25 and 34	35.9
between 35 and 40	42.7
41 >	6.8
Unknown	11.7
Family income	
< $10,000[c]	10.2
Between 10,000 and 20,000	8.2
Between 20,000 and 30,000	19.4
Between 30,000 and 50,000	34.6
Between 50,000 and 75,000	16.3
> 75,000	11.2

[a] Due to divorce, separation, widowhood, or being single. [b] Living with parents, others, etc. [c] Receiving public assistance and/or living with grandparents.

Case Study Procedure

All 102 families were visited by a trained interviewer who conducted a 2- to 3-hour semi-structured interview with the available family members. The interview provided an opportunity for each family to "tell its story." Interviewers were provided with specific questions and topics to be covered with all cohort families and trained to use probes to ensure that equivalent material was obtained for all families. In addition to the interview materials, narrative fieldnotes were compiled for all contacts with each family, and each family completed several standardized, response-limited scales. The scale results will be presented in future reports when statistical analysis is complete.

Case materials were assembled for each family using a standard procedure. In the present paper we report exclusively on case material, which was collected, analyzed, and reported according to systematic case study procedures (Kaufman, 1988; Levine, Gallimore, Weisner, & Turner, 1980; Spradley, 1979; Werner & Schoepfle, 1987a, 1987b). Direct quotations from the interviews are presented, with clarifying contextual material added. The selection of illustrative material followed these criteria: First, we chose cases that are representative of significant features of the entire cohort of 102 families, and of subsets of the families, that illustrate principles, phenomena, and variables of interest. Second, significant and potentially significant variations within the entire cohort are represented. Third, staff consensus regarding this material was used to check on the validity of material. If available, multiple data sources were used regarding specific points.

Results and Discussion

In the interviews parents revealed a central dynamic of their lives. They were driven by the task of *constructing and sustaining a daily routine* for themselves and their children and making that routine satisfying and coherent in terms of their view of family and child life. With respect to their developmentally delayed child, most parents wanted each day organized to provide what they believed was proper care, supervision, and stimulation for their children. They wanted the children to be with certain people, engaged in selected activities, with preferred motives driving interactions. However, they realized that they must balance these goals, and the efforts and resources required to maintain them, against other parental goals and econiche demands.

As parents talked about their developmentally delayed children and their daily routines, three characteristics of the ecocultural niche and its construction were evident: (a) Niche features are interconnected, contingent pieces of an ongoing puzzle rather than isolated presses. They are also hierarchical; some features have more impact on the daily routine than others, according to parents' own reports and our analysis. (b) The valence of niche features as resources (positive) or constraints (negative) depends on their use by parents in the context of their socially constructed econiche. (c) Construction of the daily routine and its activity settings is mediated by central family *themes* that give meaning to parents' decisions concerning their daily routine; these themes determine the relative impact of niche features and whether they are viewed as resources,

constraints, or simply ignored. The themes are a window to the social construction process that shapes the ecocultural niche of the family.

The Hierarchical and Interconnected Nature of the Niche

Prior to the collection of our data, we specified a set of pieces of this ecocultural puzzle—a list of ecocultural features likely to impact families of developmentally delayed children. To develop our list (Appendix A), we reviewed family ecology studies and cross-cultural research (B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988; Super & Harkness, 1980; Weisner, 1984). From Weisner's summary of niche features that affect child development, we developed a provisional list specifically for families of developmentally delayed and mentally retarded children. The list was also based on analysis of case files from an earlier study of developmentally delayed children (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1982, 1986, 1988).

Sixty nonexhaustive niche features are arranged in 12 domains in our list. Although every domain was influential in shaping the family's daily routine, domains that were directly concerned with subsistence base, health and intervention/education services, child safety, and domestic chores (Domains 1, 2, 3, and 4) came up constantly in our parents' accounts. They frequently talked of juggling medical and intervention services, job schedules, standards of living, health insurance benefits, domestic workload, and parental roles.

We used the list of niche features to organize our case analysis and to arrive at our findings. As we processed the case materials, it was evident that the niche features we had identified a priori did influence many family decisions. They had ripple effects in so many parts of the daily routine that they were repeatedly mentioned even when the subject of an interview was limited to a single developmentally disabled child, and when the interview was not, on the surface, even "on" that topic.

> Buying a house required that the mother get a job because the father's employment brought in too little money. The mother's subsequent full-time work in a bank solved the problem, but it jeopardized a deeply held conviction that early intervention therapies were critically important for their developmentally delayed child. The mother's workload doubled, as she juggled work and running her child to the programs. Finally she burned out and returned to being a homemaker. Within 6 months the couple realized the mother had to return to full-time employment because of financial needs. Determined to avoid another case of burnout, the mother considered many factors. The new job needed to have flexible hours, one where she could take off time for child's appointments. In addition, more support from her husband was necessary. Childcare during the afternoons after the child's special education class must be found, as well as some means of continuing the child's speech therapy sessions. Solutions gradually emerged. She found employment that allowed her to set her own hours. She and her husband entered marriage counseling, and he became more helpful with the children, the housekeeping, and the transportation. The child was bused to a regular preschool for childcare, and the speech therapist came to the preschool. The cost of the school was steep, but the mother felt it was worth every penny for the peace of mind it gave her. Swimming therapy for the child was also important for this mother, but when she learned that it required a 40-minute drive each way, she rejected it in favor of an alternative believed to be less efficacious but located within a few minutes of the home. (Case 123)

This mother's job was not only a source of income, it was a tool for implementing child development goals: flexible hours permitted her to earn needed income yet sustain services for the child. The mother's occupation was part of a complex accommodation process linked to the parents' determination to sustain activity settings that they believe would aid development.

However, this excerpt does not reveal all of the dynamics that drove the parents' accommodations of child goals and ecocultural pressures. The house purchase that required the mother to seek employment and then to find a job with flexible hours was also related to an effort to have a safe physical location and a harmonious atmosphere:

> Mother: [It was absolutely necessary we buy a house because] with two children—we were in a two-bedroom apartment—I was going bananas. [The apartment was very] inconvenient . . . It was a second floor apartment with a balcony. Both children were in the same room. [It was unsafe] and there was absolutely no room for anybody, we were bumping into each other. I felt like if I didn't get those kids out every single day, I would go crazy. I would just lose control. I had to get out . . . [Buying the house has made a difference] . . . It's wonderful, it's just marvelous. The kids, they're able to get outside when they want to go outside and run off all their energy, they can go in and out. I can go outside and sit and watch them, I can stay inside and sort laundry while they're playing in the yard. I don't have to listen to their screaming all day long. It's wonderful. It's less stressful on everybody, it's made a big difference. (Case 123)

The family previously lived in conditions the parents regarded as unsafe and counter to their view of a positive home environment. To improve the situation, they decided to buy a house, which in turn required the mother to work, but that then jeopardized the developmentally delayed child's access to intervention services. The heavy effort and workload required led to mother "burnout," which, among other things, threatened maintenance of what they regarded as a healthy, positive family environment.

This familiar interconnectedness of all the things that sustain everyday activities, and the relatively strong influence of work, subsistence, health, and safety, means that the effects of any one feature must be interpreted in terms of its connections to features all around it in the ecocultural niche. This makes it difficult to simply "measure" niche features as discrete variables, with effects independent of other features. In the next case, a mother faced the "interconnected" quality of the ecocultural niche in desparate circumstances:

> A mother called the project field worker in despair because her developmentally delayed son's childcare center could no longer keep him due to his destructiveness, and she could find no other center or babysitter that would take him. This state of affairs put at risk the mother's effort to complete a training course that would lead to a guaranteed civil service job. The job not only meant an improved income, it also would get her off public assistance and, most importantly, provide generous medical and other employee benefits. It was not that the mother was uninterested in the cogitive development of her child; in her priorities it merely assumed a lower importance than finding a safe, inexpensive caretaking arrangement so that her job training could continue. The subsistence pressures were such she was willing to entertain temporary placement of the child in a foster home, if that was the only way she could continue her job training program. (Case 312)

In another family, the father talked of the decision to close his geographically distant shop, resume similar work in their garage, and stay home to care for and "stimulate" his developmentally delayed child. A driving force in these parents' minds was the need to "protect" the physical and mental health of the child by ensuring that he had developmentally sensitive experiences. To construct activity settings that made the experiences possible, however, changes in personnel were required, including a reversal of traditional marital and parenting roles.

> Father: The reason that I closed my [shop] is mostly because . . . it just wasn't worth the hassle of going to work . . . we found that no matter what condition your kid's in, there is really no good person to take care of your kids, because nobody takes care of them the way that you are going to take care of them.
>
> Mother: We would ask the babysitter to please do his exercises and please do his patterning because he needed to have that or he was not going to learn, and he wasn't getting it and we just felt that one of us had to be at home. We had thought it was gong to be me until Scott was born and I found that I had insurance and my husband had none. Nobody is going to give us private insurance with Scott's history right now. (Case 603)

In this case, the family was driven by the conviction that the special program the child needed could be faithfully implemented only by one or both of the parents. The manifest result was change in the personnel present in the child's everyday activities—mother works, father stays home. For the new accommodation to be sustained, however, changes were also required in values and goals that were evident in the parents' account of their construction of their new daily routine and its activity settings.

> [The] laundry never got done. The house was always a mess. You must learn to change your priorities. We used to have a real clean house, we don't have it anymore. Frankly, Scott is not going to remember if the dishes were done or the laundry was folded and put away when he is 20, but he is going to remember that he can walk and talk and stuff like that. You just have to be able to look at what is important and make time for that and do the best you can with the other stuff. (Case 603)

These parents are describing how we can "see" in their family econiche the implementation of beliefs about the critical importance of early experience. Other powerful cultural beliefs and personal values are also revealed in how their home is organized and what tasks the parents have chosen for everyday activities. For example, their account exemplifies ideas about the unique and irreplaceable roles of parents versus other caretakers. It reveals an absence of materialistic values, career-driven goals, and sex-typed role schemas. When we ask *how* they created the activity settings, they may begin with the child, but their narratives seamlessly extend to the interconnectedness of the socially constructed econiche.

Niche Features as Resources or Constraints as Defined by Parents' Social Construction

Parents described various features of the niche as simultaneously offering benefits and costs. For example, for many families in our

cohort, attempts to practice religion can be a mixed blessing:

Mother: Our new church doesn't have anybody who would be willing to take care of Allen.

Father: My mom says she would be willing to take care of him to let us go to church—at the church. She would take care of him at the church but then she wouldn't get to attend the service.

Mother: Which I don't think is right either. They asked *me* to teach the Sunday School—I said, "What's the good of that? I'm not getting away from what I have at home." (Case 103)

The father's mother who would have to give up church attendance also generously provided weekday babysitting. To impose on her on the weekend risked stretching a valuable subsistence-supporting resource too thin. The role offered the mother—teaching in the church school—would solve the problem of providing care for the child at church, but at the cost of adding to an already heavy maternal workload. The temporary solution was abandonment by the mother of church participation.

Support and help always need to be assessed against the reciprocity and costs involved in obtaining it (cf. Belle, 1982). This reflects a characteristic of ecocultural theory that is at variance with other conceptualizations of family ecology. The valence of niche features cannot be established a priori; even features as apparently "good" as social support or religious faith may not have a positive valence in a family's social construction of their niche and its activities.

For example, one grandmother who babysat rejected the possibility of a serious developmental problem and constantly challenged the idea that the child was delayed. The mother dealt with this conflict by carefully managing her contacts with the grandmother. As a result, this grandmother's instrumental contributions were offset by the costs to the mother in emotional support.

Similarly, older siblings in some homes are either helpful or troubling or both, depending in part on how the family conceives of their roles in everyday routines:

The older sister in an affluent, married couple family served as a significant caretaker for her 4-year-old developmentally delayed sibling. The 9-year-old sister was given major responsibilities. For example, she was observed in charge of her sibling by an unfenced swimming pool. When the two girls entered the house, the older girl carefully latched the sliding glass door. When the developmentally delayed sibling began to whine, the mother urged the older girl to play with the child, or asked her to come to get her. In every case, the presence of the older sister quieted the developmentally delayed child. (Case 804)

Many other examples could be cited besides the potentially mixed benefits of grandmothers and siblings. However, these serve to illustrate how the valence of features in family members' lives depends not only on inherent properties of that feature but on its use by and meaning to families. To oversimplify, "social support" is not always good, and limited income or the lack of a high school diploma is not always bad. The level of income and material goods cannot be classified as resources, as opposed to constraints, until family goals and purposes are considered. Before they can be evaluated as better or worse, niche features have to be organized according to the meaning they have for the family and their role in family accommodation: When a family talks about the "meaning" of niche features for their lives, it is often expressed in terms of overarching themes that drive their efforts.

Construction of the Daily Routine: The Organizing Role of Family Themes

The thematic character of a family's life is frequently remarked on by clinicians and researchers alike. In our cohort, for example, such themes included: using a religious explanation of family practices and problems of the developmentally delayed child; creating for the developmentally delayed child a "natural and normal childhood"; "bombarding" the child with every possible "development-accelerating" intervention; focusing on sheer economic survival and maintenance of the domestic family unit on a week to week basis; upward social and economic mobility, including the steady acquisition of material possessions and the maintenance of a beautiful home; keeping the whole family together, equally involved and rewarded in joint activities; positioning the family for free or subsidized services; ensuring that both parents can sustain rewarding careers.

Themes such as these are detected not only because families clearly perceive or articulate them, but also because *families are trying to implement or have implemented them across many activity settings*. The building blocks of implementation are the five components of children's activity settings defined in the opening paragraphs of this paper (available personnel, tasks, motives, goals, and scripts). To construct and maintain activity settings that express their thematic goals, parents must balance various niche constraints against resources as well as accommodate personal characteristics of family members, especially those of the developmentally delayed child.

Parents may not be fully aware of this accommodation process or see the thread connecting their efforts. Even when they talk about it as clearly as some did (e.g., mother in Case 103 that follows), it is not proper to infer that it is conscious or deliberate. What is certain is how much the accommodation process figures in their lives and how the process is influenced by family themes. These, in turn, determine the relative impact of a given niche feature, whether it is a resource or a constraint, and how much impact it has on activity settings.

[The therapists] . . . have been real good about giving us all things to do; in fact, they gave the older boy assignments, and that's really helped him. It gives [my husband] a job. It gives me a job. . . . so each one of us, [the grandparents], and the babysitter, when we all have our time with her, we're supposed to do our job with her . . . [When we get home from work] we . . . let [her] watch what we're cooking and talk about what we're doing. Same with the laundry—I let [her] watch what I do, same as with the dishes. I talk about each thing I do. I use that as a language experience. Then we have our dinner, and we talk about what happened during the day. We have very supportive parents, sisters and brother-in-laws, friends are very supportive. . . . When the babysitter is sick, [both sets of grandparents] trade off. . . . Usually, if the grandparents are here, [the therapist's plan] gives them a job too. . . . His mom [should] have been a physical therapist [because she is so good at carrying out the therapist's instructions]. (Case 103)

Across multiple activity settings, this family seeks to implement a program they believe will foster physical and language development. For them it is a crucial "theme." The parents strive to organize each activity setting so it includes a person who they believe grasps the growth-promoting potential of tasks, games, and mundane interactions and conversations—a caregiver or companion who is competent to carry out desired scripts. Even ordinary daily cores can become opportunities to implement the desired interactions. For this family, what has transformed a mundane chore, or any interaction, into an activity setting that implements their goals is the presence, with the child, of a person who has internalized the therapist's purpose.

However, implementing family-identified goals for children is not always easy:

Mother: Harriet [our regular daycare woman] used to be really exercising [our daughter Kathy]—but Harriet just isn't the same anymore. She talks all the time. She doesn't leave any time to let Kathy talk back to her. . . . [e.g., She doesn't encourage her to talk]. . . . Kathy is starting to use three word sentences—she's starting to do a lot of naming of things. When you talk to her, you need to talk to her about *what* she's doing. I want her to say it back to me if she can. Like, Harriet, she just keeps talking and doesn't give her a chance to say it back. . . . Harriet's a little bit on the slower side of things. She doesn't use very good English, but she's loving. We think Kathy needs to go on now and start getting something different from somebody else, but Harriet's been really dependable. . . . I don't think she can teach Kathy anymore. . . . I don't want to down her, she's really a nice lady . . . very loving. (Case 103)

The babysitter's perceived inadequacy foreshadows an activation of the family accommodation process. The interconnected, hierarchical, and mixed valence of niche features are vividly apparent, as are the mixture of material and socially constructed features that make up family accommodations. To honor one part of their family theme of multiple activity setting instantiations of "language development," they may have to abandon a childcare arrangement that has worked well in the past and has many attractive benefits. It has provided the child with an emotionally appropriate (from the parents' point of view) daycare arrangement and helped sustain the family subsistence base (two parents employed fulltime). However, the family's goals for language development have expanded as the child has developed. What was once a satisfactory accommodation is no longer and must be changed because "loving" and "exercising" childcare are no longer enough. We must know the social meaning of the babysitter's newly perceived "limitations" to understand why a materially "good" accommodation is no longer acceptable. We later learned in a follow-up phone call that the babysitter was "re-trained," and no new accommodation was constructed.

Other families have different themes that likewise are organizing dynamics in the social construction process. One mother described several ways in which she inserts her "Biblical" values into the daily routine so that they influence her children. For example, she attends a class for "Christian" mothers, and she encourages her children to read church-recommended books. Unlike the mother in Case 103, there is no indication that accelerating the developmentally delayed child's development is the principal concern; but the theme of infusing Biblical

content into everyday activities drives her accommodations and shapes the meaning of her constructed daily routine just as clearly.

Family themes can transform what may seem to be a stimulating, enriched home environment into a stressful and frenzied set of activities of uncertain benefit or turn a seemingly "impoverished" family circumstance into a satisfying and meaningful one.

> The mother's week was organized around driving her developmentally delayed son to programs, and waiting around to drive him home. She worried constantly about the child getting as much early "intervention" as he could get. "I wanted to get as much stimulation to him as possible. . . . If it's hard for him to learn, the more information that's coming at him more often, the more he's gonna [get]. . . . If he has to have it ten times to get the answer, then give it to him ten times, so long as he's not going to short-circuit on having too much." A year later, the mother told us she had "burned out." The family had dramatically reduced their personal efforts to accelerate development, placed the child in a special education class, and hired domestic help. This mother has returned to fulltime work, and now says, in effect, "I am going to be a mother, get on with my life, and stop being a chauffeur and therapist." (Case 204).

> [Another] developmentally delayed child lives in what could easily be termed a socially and economically deprived environment. Her working class parents are happy that she is in a special program, but they spend no time reading to her or carrying out therapy exercises, and she has been provided with few toys. However, she is surrounded by extended family members—some in the grandparents' home in front of her parents' garage apartment, others in the house next door—and she interacts with these people daily. The kinds of activities their way of life creates is full of opportunities for her to jointly participate in a variety of tasks and conversations. This pattern is a direct reflection of strongly held values of the parents regarding the interdependence of the extended family unit. (Case 224)

It is explicit recognition of the social construction process, reflected vividly in family themes, that distinguishes ecocultural theory as a promising alternative to other family ecology approaches. Ecocultural theory suggests that ecology is not only a matter of toting up material resources or constraints. Though these "material facts" of family life are powerful indeed, and must not be ignored, their impact cannot be understood in the absence of a social constructivist perspective. The social constructions of families—this mix of ecology and culture we call the "econiche," which is often manifested in overarching themes—can have a powerful impact on the daily activities of children, and thus on developmentally significant experiences.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF ECOCULTURAL THEORY FOR STUDIES OF FAMILIES WITH DEVELOPMENTALLY DELAYED CHILDREN

Method

The case materials indicate the complexity of family accommodations, and how unlikely they are to be detected by methods widely used in the study of developmentally delayed children and their families, such as generalized, global measures of socioeconomic status, child developmental status, attitudes, behavior, and adjustment. Even sophisticated statistics cannot "assemble" from discrete measures the constituents of family accommodation into a picture of the accommodation process or its products. When, however, these measures are combined with interviews, observations, and ethnography, they create a data set to which the analytical concepts of ecocultural theory may be applied.

Some method changes are required by ecocultural theory. For example, the theory challenges the common practice of assigning a priori valences and causal priorities to widely used marker variables such as income, household size, or the number of social network supports. Although such variables are predicted by ecological theory to have potential impact on activity settings, the nature of the influence is not taken for granted: more support, money, and room are not necessarily "better" and "the more powerful" influences on children.

The theory also suggests that parents' beliefs can be equal or more powerful influences on a child than class or subsistence-related circumstances because beliefs can affect the social construction of everyday routines and activities. Parents' beliefs about the aspects of a child's development they consider most desirable, or whether they believe God can cure their child, are powerful forces in understanding a family's ecocultural niche. It is explicit recognition of this social construction process that distinguishes ecocultural theory as a promising alternative to other family ecology approaches.

Outcomes Assessment

One reason holistic data and parents' beliefs are important in ecocultural theory is because the preferred units of analysis are not individuals. The preferred units are the everyday activities constructed by parents within the constraints and opportunities provided by their ecology and culture. Activities as an analytical unit lead to dimensions for outcome assessment that are nonindividualistically based, and that are not a priori linked to incomes or other social class-related indices. The following is a brief description of one such outcome measure: sustainability of activity settings.

In ecocultural theory, evaluations of family ecologies as "better" or "worse" for child psychosocial outcomes begin with this question: "In the context of the constraints and opportunities in the family's niche, how do the activity settings established in the family's everyday routine fit together in a sustainable way, and how do they fit the needs and goals of every family member as well as the requirements of the developmentally delayed child?" Ecocultural theory suggests that one of the best predictors of child and family outcome will be the "sustainability" of activity settings across times and multiple situations, rather than more conventional measures such as stimulation level or quality of home environments.

Other conditions being equal, parents who are sanguine about their ecocultural niche and its activity settings will construct accommodations that are sustainable across time and varied circumstances. Sustainability of activity settings in this sense should produce more positive outcomes for families and their developmentally delayed children than will professionally designed accommodations that might be "more stimulating" but that cannot be sustained. Lack of sustainability can occur even though the parents accept a professional's recommendations and underlying values. Econiche constraints—inadequate time or money or an already overburdened parental workload—may make a program infeasible, and/or preexisting parental values may compete with the professional goals. If for these reasons an accommodation is hard to sustain, in the long run it will have weak or no effects on child and family outcomes no matter its theoretical potential.

Differences and Commonalities of Families With and Without Developmentally Delayed Children

Ecocultural theory applies to all children in all families. Although the niche features presented in Appendix A are tailored to our study of families of developmentally delayed children, the list could be expanded to apply to families of nondelayed children and to families in other cultures. In fact, the list is derived from such an attempt by Weisner (1984), following the Whitings (LeVine, 1977; Munroe et al., 1981; Nerlove & Snipper, 1981; Super & Harkness, 1980; Weisner & Gallimore, 1985; B. Whiting, 1976; B. Whiting & Edwards, 1988; J. Whiting & Whiting, 1975). This generality of ecocultural theory is an advantage because it does not assume, before analysis and comparison has been done, that developmentally delayed children, or their families, are necessarily different from nondelayed children and their families. Ecocultural theory does not treat families of developmentally delayed children or the children themselves as inevitably developing, or more likely to develop, psychopathology, for example. Indeed, ecocultural theory proposes the following hypothesis regarding family activity settings: The activity settings of our families with developmentally delayed children will be far more similar to activities of families in this culture with nondelayed children than they will be different. This hypothesis suggests that comparing activities element-by-element will show considerable ecocultural shaping and similarity in the activities of both types of families—more similarity than difference. This view suggests that the cultural place within which development occurs—urban North America versus rural India, or Tahiti, or Western Kenya—exerts a powerful influence on the construction of activity settings that is shared by families with and without developmentally delayed children.

Nevertheless, the theory can be used to locate interesting and significant differences between families with and without developmentally delayed children. For example, our case materials suggest that differences in other "hassle level" of developmentally delayed children makes a difference in accommodation and social construction. The term *hassle* connotes the idea that *perceived* child impact is a concatenation of the relation between objective child characteristics (physical handicaps, incomprehensible speech, or out-of-control behaviors such as tantrumming and shrieking) and their impact on the family. The conception of hassle level as a composite measure of child status and family impact reflects the interconnected, socially constructed nature of the ecocultural niche and its everyday activities. Higher hassle translates into more ramifications across more niche domains and features than does low hassle. Extreme behavior problems, poor communicative skills, and physical limitations are

child handicaps that can ripple through many levels of the niche and be reflected in many family accommodations. For some cases, virtually every domain of a family's econiche is affected, beginning with the subsistence base that is threatened by the difficulty of maintaining stable childcare arrangements and continuing through the domestic workload and other niche features.

Our in-progress longitudinal study suggests that hassle level may differentiate among families with developmentally delayed children: families with high hassle developmentally delayed children may be characterized by heavier mother workload, more mothers deferring employment or career development, and a greater engagement of siblings in childcare. These families may have a variety of social activities closed off to them due to their high hassle child. However, similar comparisons may show that low hassle delayed children and their families look very similar to families without a delayed child. With a category as diverse as developmental delay, comparisons using families of nondelayed children require specification of which child and which family characteristics differ.

Global comparisons between families with and without developmentally delayed children can mislead and misinform. If we were to compare our cohort to a random sample of families without developmentally delayed children, our families might appear different in certain dimensions, as the hassle level discussion suggests. However, these differences may not reflect patterns unique to families of delayed children. More relevant are comparisons with nondelayed child families in which there is some kind of intentional child-focused accommodation (i.e., a relevant comparison group for families with developmentally delayed children who are engaged in the accommodation process are families without such children who are engaged in similar social construction processes.

Families with developmentally delayed children are not the only families in our culture who are trying to deliberately construct an econiche that will influence their child's development towards or away from the cultural norm. In contemporary North American society, enthusiasm for all sorts of family goals or themes has waxed and waned over generations. For example, some current enthusiasms that appear with some frequency in families of nondelayed children include efforts to create "super children" through strenuous efforts at early stimulation and teaching. "Born-again" religious fundamentalists have reorganized their activities around religious themes. Others are making efforts to reduce conventional sex-typing schemas and practices for their children or are trying to live as "naturally" as they can (Weisner, Bausano, & Kornfein, 1983). Such goals or themes can produce accommodation and niche construction behaviors that are difficult to distinguish from behaviors that characterize families trying to "overcome" a child's developmental delay.

Families of developmentally delayed children are trying in various ways to make a developmentally delayed child more "normal," whereas families with nondelayed children who are trying to create "super" children, for example, are trying to make a normally developing child "less normal." Developmentally delayed children are, of course, not voluntarily chosen, whereas parents in some sense make the choice of creating "super" children, sex egalitarian children, or some other "nonnormative" developmental outcome. In both situations, however, the families are trying to construct activities to alter their child; this process may be similar in many ways. Variations in commitment to such efforts among families without developmentally delayed children provide what we believe to be an interesting comparison to similar variations in similar commitments that we find among our families with developmentally delayed children.

The tradition of global comparison of families with and without developmentally delayed or mentally retarded children, matched by chronological or mental age or developmental stage, certainly can provide useful information, and the findings of such comparisons must ultimately be explained. Too often, however, such comparisons have led to social mischief in the form of psychopathological explanations applied to whole categories of developmentally delayed children and their families. An ecocultural approach suggests that comparison groups should be chosen in terms of processes of social construction of activity settings rather than global family or individual child status alone. It is a more complicated approach, one that requires a dynamic analysis of family actions in the econiche, but it can lead to an appreciation that some differences we find between families with and without developmentally delayed children are more apparent than real. Compared to families with nondelayed children voluntarily constructing innovative econiches, some differences once treated as pathologies in families with developmentally delayed children may in fact reflect the historically evolved, adapted role of the family—as a storehouse and engine for innovation, change, and adaptability to improbable and unfortunate biological and ontogenetic circumstances.

In conclusion, families as well as scientists face an awesome task of finding meaning in "a swirling cloud of interacting organisms and environments" (Scarr, 1985, p. 502). Most of the families in our cohort are actively constructing and refining a niche that they believe will make their child "more normal" or "as normal as possible," or "able to be all that my child can attain." Few parents are passive in establishing their routine. To the task they apply not only material resources, which range from extraordinarily rich to severely limited, but also personal and cultural values and beliefs. Parents' accounts of their accommodation process return again and again to what it takes to construct a daily routine that fits with the interconnected character of their ecocultural niche and is sustainable, personally satisfying, and responsive to the developmentally delayed child. Even if our theory did not require understanding the social construction of family ecology, the parents' accounts would. We only have to listen to what they tell us.

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Appendix A

Tentative List of Representative Variables for 12 Ecocultural Features

1. Family Subsistence and Financial Base
   a. Employment history of parents
   b. Hours worked and flexibility of hours
   c. Tenure and security of employment, stability and regularity of income sources
   d. Level of employment, occupational rank
   e. "Job" vs. "career" vs. "calling"
   f. Work done at home, very near to home
   g. Amount of unearned income
   h. Equity available to family, amounts ever used
   i. Extent of self-direction of work, complexity or organization of work, control over work process or product (Kohn, 1977)

2. Accessibility of Health and Educational Services
   a. Distance from home to employment, services, etc.
   b. Means and cost of transportation available and used
   c. Schedule juggling, problems in access (hours open, timing, family separation/integration)
   d. Flexibility of services (hours, location, etc.)
   e. Required or voluntary parent group participation (as part of child services or otherwise)
   f. Care or aid provided in home for child by outside professionals
   g. Role of Regional Center for identified developmentally delayed children

3. Home and Neighborhood Safety and Convenience
   a. Yard vs. no yard, fencing, neighborhood play areas and accessibility to child
   b. Architectural issues, house safety and convenience (e.g., space available, one or two stories, interior organization & design, childproofing)
   c. Neighborhood safety measures perceived by parents, judged by observers, and assessed by city statistics
   d. Use of neighborhood places and services by child and family (cf. Medrich, Roizen, Rubin, & Buckley, 1982)

4. Domestic Task and Chore Workload (Excluding Child Care) and Family Division of Labor
   a. Chore and task inventory: who does these, frequency, and timing; level of family concern over work and cleanliness, etc.
   b. Absolute workload (numbers of persons in family, time spent, etc.)
   c. Perceived workload pressures on parents and children
   d. Complexity of chores and who does them; ages at which children take on work with responsible, self-managed sequences of tasks (Nerlove, Roberts, Klein, Yarbrough, & Habicht, 1984)
   e. Task sharing, complementary, specialization of roles
   f. Exclusivity of work or available alternatives to person with primary responsibility
   g. Children's work outside home (if any)
   h. Personnel available in family for aid (family size & composition, non-kin members)

5. Childcare Tasks
   a. Personnel available and used (parents, grandparents, other kin, siblings, friends, neighbors)
   b. Number and variety of specific childcare jobs
   c. Amount of care and supervision time daily, degree of direct responsibility, control and monitoring required (Weisner & Gallimore, 1977)
   d. Additional childcare due to developmentally delayed child's particular problems (vs. routine care for other children)
   e. Specialized settings or interactions created by child's problems (e.g., program requirements, reading, special babysitting skills)
   f. Extent of specialized *instrumental* child care jobs vs. *social* involvements, or training, etc.

6. Children's Play Groups
   a. Age, sex, and kinship category of playmates, including family, kin, and neighborhood groups
   b. Frequency of participation in playgroups
   c. Parent-organized and created playgroups; frequency, type, and hassle involved in such groups
   d. Extent of parental and/or older siblings structuring and intervention in peer play groups; degree of supervision and monitoring

7. Marital Role Relationships
   a. Quality of couple roles (companionate/intimate, degree of role separation, sharing of decision-making, domains of control and responsibility)
   b. Degree of task complementarity (fixed role vs. shared functioning styles)
   c. Degree of socioemotional involvement and sharing in decisions involving developmentally delayed child
   d. Decision-making style

8. Networks and Organizational Involvement
   a. Formal groups (church, organizations, parents' groups, etc.)
   b. Informal (neighbors, kin, friends, casual contacts with professionals [e.g., chats after school, etc.]; parents' contacts with other parents of handicapped children
   c. Degree of instrumental vs. socioemotional involvement with such groups
   d. Degree of support by groups vs. aid given to others in groups

9. Role of Father and Mother in Childcare
   a. Degree of participation (see tasks, marital role, and child care data)
   b. Organizational involvement (see previous section)
   c. Quality of involvement with spouse regarding developmentally delayed child (dominant, coequal, supportive, avoidant)
   d. Nonbiological males involved in home, roles of alternate male caretakers
   e. Focus of father involvement with developmentally delayed child (instrumental, supervision and management, recreational, emotional, etc.)
   f. Sibling and other nonparental care replacing or complementing parental care

10. Sources of Child Cultural Influence
    a. Overall TV viewing, games, organized sports and activities, family cultural activities, etc.
    b. Extent of parental management, control in presentation of information for child

11. Sources of Parental Information and Goals
    a. Books, lectures, training, classes, required parent groups
    b. Special job, interest, or status giving access to information (e.g., mother is registered nurse and knows about programs, father knows psychologist in field)
    c. Variety of alternative conceptions of treatment, etiology, etc. available to family (megavitamins, special programs, etc.); are parents aware of a range of ideas and developments regarding developmental delay?

12. Community Heterogeneity
    a. Variety of social and cultural views of develop-

mental delay, behavior and attitudes toward handicaps, etc. (see No. 11)

b. Social and cultural views and attitudes toward conventional success or achievement in community, the value of education, etc.

c. Diversity of local community as a reference point for child's status (e.g., is community homogeneous and child, therefore, unique; does he/she "stand out" on some dimensions and not others [appearance, speech, movement, cognitive ability, etc.]; are these selectively important in community?)

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Family Life Problems, Daily Caregiving Activities, and the Psychological Well-Being of Mothers of Mentally Retarded Children

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Problematic situations experienced by mothers of mentally retarded children and those characteristics of retarded children that may influence family life problems were examined. Thirty mothers had a mentally retarded child and 30 had only nonretarded children. Home interviews and follow-up telephone interviews were conducted on seven separate evenings. Comparisons revealed group differences in children's characteristics and in duration of maternal involvement in child-oriented activities. No overall group differences in maternal well-being emerged. Child welfare issues and restrictive time demands were the most intense family problems reported by mothers with retarded children. Ratings of more intense family problems were associated with more time spent with the child and more symptoms of maternal depression.

The birth and continuing care of mentally retarded children are often stressful experiences for family members as these children's difficulties inevitably touch the lives of those around them (Crnic, Friedrich, & Greenberg, 1983; Featherstone, 1980). The effects on the family unit can be far-reaching, restrictive, and disruptive, and they may be economic, social, or emotional (Schonell & Watts, 1956). Consequently, parents of retarded children have generally been viewed as being at risk for a variety of family life problems and emotional difficulties. Paramount among their family life problems are unusual caregiving demands and restrictive time demands (Beckman, 1983). For many family members, especially mothers, management of the daily needs of a retarded child may constitute an all-consuming task (Bradshaw & Lawton, 1978; Butler, Gill, Pomeroy, & Fartrell, 1978). Crnic and Greenberg (1985) found that the cumulative impact of daily parenting hassles and difficulties in dealing with children represent significant stressors that may subsequently affect parent and family functioning.

As the children develop, many families must begin coping with long-term uncertainty regard-

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