Most psychology is about middle-class North Americans of European ancestry, or about middle-class Europeans. This book is concerned with the limitations of a culture-bound approach to our understanding of human behavior around the world and among ourselves. The richness of variation in settings of human life, behavior, and ways of thinking about the world challenges us to develop a more comprehensive frame of knowing about people in their contexts, whether these be the snowy wastelands of the arctic regions, the densely populated cities of Asia, or the suburbs of middle America.

It is important to step back from the cross-cultural panorama and ask: If culture is so powerful in organizing an individual's behavior, how does it come to be that way? For the comparative social scientist interested in human development, the central question concerns not so much differences in behavior today, but rather variations in social forces that interact with development over the life-course to produce differences that are observable at any given point. In particular, how does the culture of one's childhood lay a distinctive foundation, one that may be altered in adulthood but still lasts a lifetime? How is it that growing up in a particular cultural setting—whether it be Boston, Rio de Janeiro, or the Serengeti plains of Tanzania—leads to the establishment of ways of thinking and acting so integral to one's identity that they will survive even radical changes of environment in later years? Understanding the mind and its behavioral manifestations—psychology—ultimately also requires understanding the culture that shaped it. To see the interplay of ethos and psyche, one needs to look at how individuals develop in cultural context.

Over the last century, several ways of studying this process have contributed to our present understanding (for one summary of this work, see Harkness & Super, 1987). Anthropologists have carried out detailed studies of life in other societies, many

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of them now fundamentally altered by modern change. This has provided us with pictures of child life and family functioning from around the world. Some of these have had a wide influence on American ideas about growing up, as when Margaret Mead’s study of adolescence in Samoa in the late 1920s became a best-seller (Mead, 1928). In another approach, cross-cultural psychologists have taken tests of development and other standardized measures to children who live in distinctly different environments, such as communities where Western-style schooling has not yet been introduced. Although the results of comparisons with middle-class Western children have sometimes been construed as showing developmental “deficits” or lags in the non-Western group, they have increasingly been used to illustrate the different developmental paths that distinct cultural environments offer. In all societies, most children grow up to be competent adults; an important contribution of systematic cross-cultural comparisons has been to show how competence can be variously defined and how children come to achieve it.

INSIGHTS GAINED FROM CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

Two important insights have been gained from research on children and families in other cultures. The first concerns regularities in how different parts of a culture work together as a system. The ways that children are reared, for example, tend to follow certain aspects of the society’s economic means of production. Children in traditional agriculturally based societies usually have many household chores, and they are taught responsibility and obedience from an early age (see for example, Whiting & Edwards, 1988). The families of these children are often large, with many children and other members of the extended family living in the same household or nearby; and the families are also governed by stronger lines of authority from older to younger. In contrast, children of Western middle-class families—especially U.S. middle-class children—tend to grow up in small, nuclear families oriented to developing their own individual capacities to the utmost, while the parents support the family economically and through their labor in the household. In both kinds of environments, children learn about what is expected of them through multiple messages in the environment—from the way that the living space is organized, to the activities that parents plan for children and the ways they interact with them.

The second discovery of cross-cultural research is that parents and children in all times and places face some of the same problems, experience some of the same needs, and seek some of the same rewards and pleasures. Although the experience of each child and of the children of each culture is unique, the overall experience of childhood is constructed around a common story of human development. All children must learn to walk, to play with other children, to experience the departure and return of their mothers, and to submit to the care of various different people. Boys and girls everywhere must learn gender-appropriate roles—even though the content of these may vary radically—and before they reach the cultural definition of adulthood, children everywhere must learn how to be responsible contributors to their own communities.

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE “DEVELOPMENTAL NICHE?”

The idea of the developmental niche combines the above two main lessons into a framework for thinking about human development in cultural context (Super & Harkness, 1986). It can be used to organize information about children’s development and to focus investigations for improving the lives of children and families. Although it is not a theory of development in the formal sense, the developmental niche provides a framework for understanding how cultures guide the process of development. By using this framework, it is possible to see how the cultural environments of particular children are organized—to see how the culture is presented to the child at any particular time.

The term niche is borrowed from biological ecology, where it is used to describe the combination of features of the environment a particular animal, or a species of animal, inhabits. Thus a pigeon and a robin might live “in the same place” in the sense of dwelling in the same part of a city park. But exactly where they build their nests and from what materials, the kind of food they seek in the surrounding environment, their vulnerability to various predators, all these are distinct. The particular way they fit into and exploit the same general environment is different, and they thus create a distinct niche for themselves. At the center of the developmental niche, therefore, is a particular child, of a certain sex and age, with certain temperamental
and psychological dispositions. By virtue of these and other characteristics, this child will inhabit a different cultural “world” than the worlds inhabited by other members of his family—and further, the child’s world will also change as the child grows and changes.

There are three major aspects of this child’s culture that shape his or her life. These three components together make up the developmental niche. The first component is the physical and social settings of everyday life. This includes such basic facts of social life as what kind of company the child keeps. In rural Kenya, for example, families are large—mothers often have eight or more children—and with the activities of these people based mainly at home, the baby or young child is likely to have several playmates and caretakers who are siblings. The size and shape of the living space is also an important feature of physical and social settings. By contrast, in the southern part of Holland where many people live in a small geographic area, houses are very compact and the living room also serves as the children’s playroom. Typically, if there is a baby or toddler in the house, there will be a playpen located in this room, where he or she can play independently with toys while yet in close proximity to other members of the family. Even aspects of life as basic as sleeping and eating schedules are organized by the physical and social settings of daily life. While Kenyan babies sleep with their mothers and wake to nurse at intervals through the night, for example, Dutch children are put to bed rather early by U.S. standards and learn to stay there until it’s time to get up. In contrast, young children in Italy and Spain are often kept up until late at night in order to participate in family and community events.

One cannot get very far in studying the physical and social settings of children in different cultures without realizing that many aspects of children’s environments are organized by customary practices; and it is for this reason that we identify customs of child care and child rearing as the second component of the developmental niche. The use of older siblings as caretakers in rural Kenya, for example, is customary. There are special terms for these child nurses in the native languages of Kenya, and they are expected to care for their young charges in a special way that is different from mothers’ care. Likewise, the use of playpens in Holland is customary, it is a commonly accepted solution for the problem of how to keep babies and toddlers safe and happy in the Dutch living environment. And both bedtimes and sleeping arrangements for infants also tend to follow customary patterns in different communities. This fact points to an important aspect of customs—that they are normative for families and communities. Very often, in fact, customs of care are seen by their users as the only reasonable solution to whatever need they address, indeed, the natural way to do things. Customs of care are thus a source of support for parents and other caretakers because they provide ready-made solutions to the myriad of issues that developing children present, from how to protect children from hazards in the environment to how to ensure that they are adequately educated for their future roles in society. But sometimes the function of a custom is less easy to specify because its value is primarily symbolic. Why do North American Jews and most Christians circumcise their infant sons? Why are Japanese children taught just the right brush strokes to write the pictographs of the Japanese alphabet? Why do many Native American adolescents embark on a solitary spirit quest?

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It is these cultural ways of thinking and feeling, held by parents and other caretakers, that we recognize as the third component of the developmental
The Developmental Niche

niche, the psychology of the caretakers. Parents' cultural belief systems and related emotions underlie the customs of child rearing and validate the organization of physical and social settings of life for children. In cultures where babies and young children customarily sleep close to their parents, for example, parents often feel that to put the child elsewhere—or even worse, to fail to attend to a child who wakes crying in the night—amounts to no less than neglect. On the contrary, among U.S. middle class families where babies are often put to bed in their own separate rooms, practices geared to teaching the baby to sleep through the night and quiet itself upon waking are understood as part of a larger agenda to train the child to be independent, a culturally important attribute throughout life. We can see in this case that parental beliefs about sleeping arrangements in both kinds of settings reflect more general ideas about the person in society. The psychology of the caretakers, thus, is an important channel for communicating general cultural belief systems to children, through very specific context-based customs and settings.

Figure 1 illustrates these three components of the developmental niche and their relationships to each other, the child, and the wider environment. First, the settings, customs, and caretaker psychology, as explained above, form the immediate micro-environment of the child: they are the developmental niche.

The three double-headed arrows represent an important relationship within the niche, that is, that the three components influence each other. A variety of forces, psychological and practical, promote a sense of harmony among the three components. Parents do not easily leave their children in settings which they judge to be dangerous. The customs of child care are generally adapted to the particular physical and social settings, as well as to what is symbolically acceptable to the caretakers. A steady state of complete harmony is rarely achieved, but as the irregular lines separating the components suggest, the points of contact are somewhat flexible. In this sense, the niche operates as a system, the semi-independent parts constantly influencing and adapting to each other.

The larger, single-headed arrows illustrate a second dynamic of the niche, namely that various aspects of the larger human ecology differentially influence the three components of the niche. The customs carry a particular weight of history and are a conservative force such that, other things being equal, many parents will, "without thinking," rear their children with many of the same traditions they grew up with. Economic and demographic changes may rapidly affect the settings of daily life for children. They may spend their day with fewer brothers and sisters, in a day care center, or in an urban environment. The psychology of the caretakers may be directly influenced by shifting ideas at the national or community level about the nature of children and their needs, as well as about what skills they will need for the future. In summary, there are many ways that changes in the larger society or physical environment can influence the child, but they do not all operate through the same components of the niche.

Finally, the developmental niche formulation recognizes the fact that the child and its environment accommodate each other: in Figure 1, their curves are mutually adjusted. Some views of child development emphasize the way child behavior is shaped by the environment, that is, the degree to which children must adapt to the requirements of their family and their culture. But it is also true, as more recent research has shown, that parents and caretakers alter their demands and their supports in response to the particular temperament and talents of the individual child. In addition, the child is a rapidly changing person, especially in the early years. Language and social skills develop, personal interests emerge, and the child learns to cope with,
or avoid, specific features of the niche. The niche, in this sense, also develops in response to the changing child, as well as to the outer influences. Of course many features remain constant, or at least present challenges that grow in a way parallel to changes in the child. These are the themes that take on particular strength as the child matures, themes that are most deeply woven into the values, motives, and fears of the emerging adult.

In the beginning of this chapter, we asked how it is that the cultural experience of childhood is able to play such an important and lasting role in shaping the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of people throughout their lives. The theoretical framework of the developmental niche helps to achieve such an understanding through systematic analysis of the culturally constituted components of the child's environment and their relationships with each other, the wider environment, and the child. In this analysis, it is clear that the cultural environment of the child is powerful not only because it is experienced during the formative years of life, but also because it constitutes an interactive system in which the same cultural messages are conveyed through a variety of modalities. Just as in language where the same idea may be communicated through choice of words, grammatical structure and tone of voice, so in cultural environments the child may learn the same ways of thinking and acting through the physical and social settings of daily life, the customs in which he or she participates, and the expressions of parents' ideas that are conveyed in a variety of ways. Over the span of development, these messages become so internalized that they form the core of our understandings of the world and ourselves. It is in this sense that ethos and psyche—culture and individual psychology—are fused in the re-creation and transformation of culture within the individual mind.

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