



# College of Human Ecology

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## Faculty in the College of Human Ecology Study Issues That Affect Human Well-Being from Infancy to Adulthood

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The College of Human Ecology responds to human needs. Improving nutrition and health, advancing design and technology, promoting human development throughout the life course, and securing the economic and social well-being of people comprise work done through the college’s multidisciplinary programs in research, teaching, and outreach. The emphasis on the interaction of individuals, families, and communities with their work, learning, social, and personal environments is grounded in the social and behavioral sciences as well as the life and physical sciences, humanities, and design. Much of the research in the college deals with consideration of social conditions, including policy and its implications for human well-being.

Good economic policies and related market reforms, while important, are only part of the basis for growth and improved living standards in developing countries. The research of David E. Sahn, director of the Cornell Food and Nutrition Policy Program and professor of economics in the Division of Nutritional Sciences, deals with a variety of such issues. He concentrates on the “progressivity” and impact of government social service expenditures, particularly on health and education, in developing countries; the relationship between economic growth and changes in nutritional status, poverty, and living standards; modeling of the demand for and production of health, education, and nutrition; and exploring modalities to empower the poor by decentralizing public services. Sahn uses a “bottom-up” perspective that starts from the capabilities of individuals, households, and communities in order to understand the economic, social, institutional, and natural constraints that keep the poor from prospering in growth-oriented economic reforms.

One application of this framework is Sahn’s research aimed at reducing the vulnerability to risks and shocks that characterizes the environments in which the poor live. Without access to markets and savings and lending institutions, and given the paucity of social safety nets, vulnerable groups in developing countries cannot protect themselves against the vagaries of the marketplace and the volatile environments in which they live.

Adverse events immediately increase worsening poverty, malnutrition, and food insecurity. They have potentially devastating indirect effects through behavioral responses, such as pulling children out of school or neglecting basic investments in the care of children. The latter responses worsen the plight of the poor far into the future, contributing to poverty traps and a long-term downward spiral in physical well-being and social exclusion.

Shocks are usually defined in terms of assets or incomes. However, Sahn’s research in this area focuses on other welfare dimensions of downside risks, such as health, nutrition, and learning, and the subsequent impact on productivity in labor market and household production activities. There are obvious interactions between various welfare dimensions of risk and vulnerability. Adverse circumstances that lead to poor health cause unrecoverable income poverty, and vice-versa.

David Sahn



David Sahn, Nutritional Sciences; Economics, studies the many issues that affect growth and improved living standards in developing countries.

Through his continued work on identifying and understanding the many dimensions of poverty, malnutrition, and food security, Sahn remains actively engaged as an advisor to numerous governments and various international organizations such as the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development. He is actively involved in capacity building through large-scale training grants to strengthen the human capacity of developing countries and form partnerships with universities and researchers in these countries.

The human life cycle studied through a unique combination of psychology, sociology, and history is the domain of Cornell faculty in the Department of Human Development. Research on behavioral and psychological development from conception through later life emphasizes the processes and mechanisms underlying developmental change and the ecological contexts in which development takes place. The study of the child's acquisition of language is one example of this work.

In her interdisciplinary research program, Barbara C. Lust, Human Development, seeks to identify the universals that characterize child language acquisition across all languages, and to explicate the nature of development of language during the time between birth and early childhood. The Cornell Language Acquisition Laboratory is at the center of an international network of scholars and laboratories studying various aspects of language acquisition. It links basic research on a child's first-language acquisition to research in several brain-imaging laboratories studying the neural correlates of language knowledge, as well as those studying adult second-language acquisition or childhood bilingualism.

Collaboration across institutions allows comparison of commonality and variation in language acquisition in widely different contexts. For example, a current project is closely comparing monolingual and bilingual language acquisition in Spanish (Peru) with acquisition of English (Ithaca and New York City). Children acquiring more than 20 languages have been analyzed through these efforts.

Marianella Casasola, Human Development, conducts research on several aspects of infant cognitive development and early word learning, in particular, the interaction between cognition and early language learning. Casasola has examined infants' understanding of object solidity and infant perception of physical causality. She has also investigated infants' ability to comprehend novel words for objects as well as their ability to comprehend novel words for action events. Languages differ in how they encode spatial events as spatial terms. For example, English linguistically groups spatial events according to containment (such as, "in") and support (such as, "on"), however, the Korean language groups these same events according to the tight-fit between two objects.

Casasola's more recent work investigates the relationship between infant spatial cognition and infant language. She is exploring further how infants process the spatial relationships between objects and their ability to group these events into the spatial categories used by different languages, and

Charles Harrington/CU



Barbara Lust, Human Development, studies the universals that characterize child language acquisition across all languages.

Bob Kausner/CU



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whether language can influence the manner in which infants pay attention to and group spatial events into spatial categories. Casasola's goal is to document developmental changes in infant cognitive development, explore how these abilities are recruited to acquire language, and examine whether language can influence how infants process and organize their world.

Stephen J. Ceci, Human Development, specializes in children's cognitive development. One branch of this work is research on children's eyewitness memory and adapting this research into policies that govern a child's testimonial competence. Ceci's research on children's memory examines the sources of age differences in recollections and "source misattribution," for example, the false belief that an event is familiar because of actual experience as opposed to having been imagined or suggested. While this work has helped to advance developmental theory, the highest appellate courts have also cited it in their decisions regarding children's suggestibility.

Ceci's theoretical investigations into children's intelligence and its implications for education include his examination of factors that render the use of intelligence easy, difficult, or impossible. He has shown that it is possible to exhibit highly complex ways of thinking about a problem when it is couched in certain way, but to be far less complex when the same problem is couched in a slightly different manner. In one of his studies, children were asked to solve complicated distance estimation algorithms when they were embedded in a video game versus when they were presented in a disembodied laboratory context. Children were far more complex in their reasoning in the former situation even though the problems were identical. This work is part of Ceci's and Urie Bronfenbrenner's (Human Development Emeritus) bioecological theory of cognitive development, in which aspects of the physical and social context are shown to alter problem-solving efficiency.

Ceci and Wendy M. Williams, Human Development, are co-directors of the Cornell Institute for Research on Children (CIRC), a National Science Foundation-funded center that organizes top developmental researchers from around the world to work on issues affecting the lives of children. This institute makes resources available to teams of developmental scientists in order to address the questions that "keep policymakers up at night": issues such as whether physical activity helps ameliorate attention deficits and hyperactivity in preschool-aged children, or whether violent interactive video games cause aggressive behaviors. The journal, *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, edited by Ceci, works similarly: It recruits multidisciplinary teams of accomplished scholars to tackle problems in the public interest, for example, studying whether smaller classes foster better learning outcomes.

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- Do violent interactive video games cause aggressive behaviors?



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