

Emerging Role of Occupational Therapy in Supporting Families of Autistic Children

– A qualitative study on quasi-diagnostic context in intervention and marital dynamics between primary caregivers (Supported by a grant from the National Taiwan University Hospital)

Mei-Ni Hsiao ^(1,2) & Che-Liang Wu ^(3,4)

(1) Department of Psychiatry, National Taiwan University Hospital (2) School of Occupational Therapy, College of Medicine, National Taiwan University
(3) Tsing Hua Residential College, National Tsing Hua University (4) Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, National Tsing Hua University



Introduction



The Missing Link in Practice

Family-Centered Practice (FCP)

- What Are We Missing?
- Evolution from Therapist-as-Expert to Collaborative Partnership.
- Occupational Performance Coaching (OPC) builds caregiver capacity (Graham et al., 2020).
- The Gap: Interventions often focus on the Parent–Child Dyad, overlooking the Marital Subsystem.
- Marital quality mediates parenting stress and raising a autistic child strains this bond.

Clinical Observation:

Quasi-Diagnostic Language

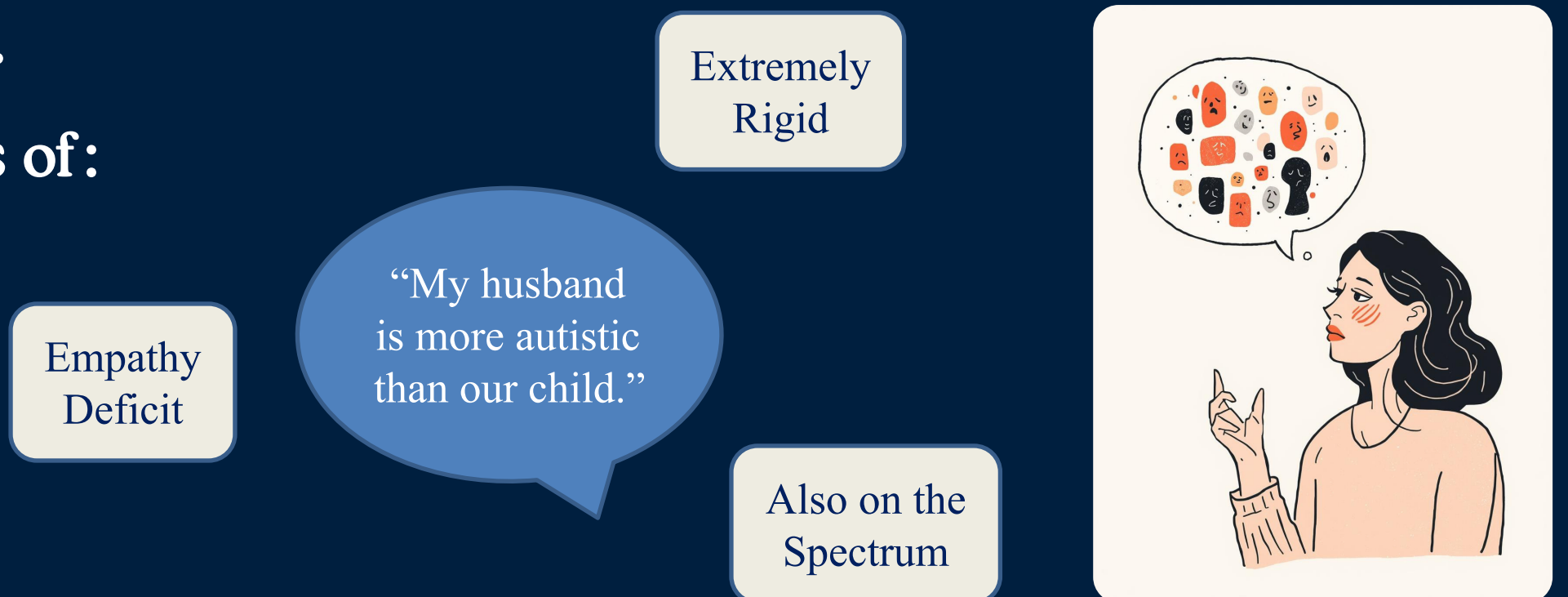
Primary caregivers (mostly mothers) use quasi-diagnostic language to describe partners

- This phenomenon reflects how families express their experiences.
- Medicalization: Interpreting complex relational behaviors through biomedical frameworks (Shim & Clarke, 2009).

The quasi-diagnostic language often signals underlying stress and communication needs between parents, impacting family dynamics.

- Not just complaints, but psycho-relational signals of:

1. Caregiver overwhelm
2. Marital strain
3. A cry for help



Objectives

1 Examine

the phenomenon

Explore the functions and meanings of quasi-diagnostic language used by primary caregivers of autistic children within the context of occupation therapy intervention.

2 Analyze

the impact

Examine how medicalized spousal narratives affect co-parenting interactions, family cohesion, and the consistency of home programs.

3 Propose

forward-thinking Strategies

Develop clinical frameworks and strategies for occupational therapists to reframe marital tensions from obstacles into therapeutic leverages, thus strengthening family resilience.

Methodology

Study Design

- Qualitative study
- Grounded Theory Approach
- Constructivist paradigm

Participants

- 8 Mothers of autistic children currently in OT intervention

Data Collection

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews

Data Analysis

- Verbatim transcripts
- Iterative coding (Open, Axial, Selective) to identify core themes

Theme 1

Signal of Double Burden

Interpreting Cry for Help from the Primary Caregiver

"He has zero empathy."

"He is rigid just like our kid."

The Quasi-diagnostic language served two purposes :

Function 1: Coping mechanism

- Using medical labels to make sense of a confusing relationship.
- Aligning with Extreme Male Brain theories (Baron-Cohen, 2002).

Using language as a coping strategy

Function 2: Validating the burden

- The dual-natured experience of parents raising autistic children
- Expressing the stress of raising an autistic child plus managing a partner perceived as limited.

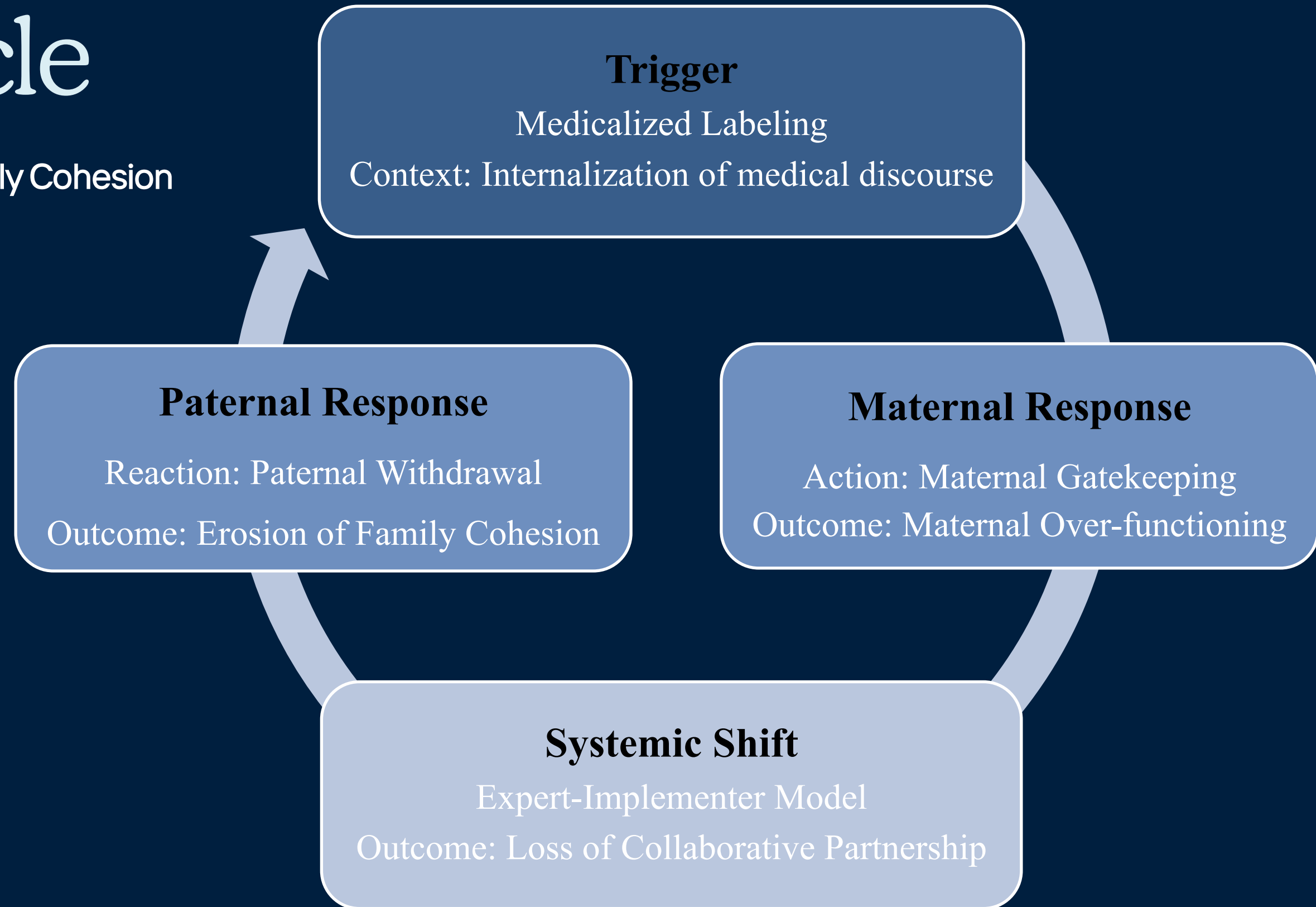
Mothers reporting emotional exhaustion

Theme 2

The Vicious Cycle

Disrupting Co-Parenting Partnership and Family Cohesion

- When spousal behaviors were framed as pathological rather than relational differences, it created rigid, unhelpful patterns that contradict the FCP goal of collaborative partnership.



Theme 3

Parenting as Re-Traumatization

Triggering Unresolved Emotional Pain and Reduced Intervention Efficacy

Daily Friction : Parenting tasks trigger unresolved marital conflict.

Occupational Impact:

- Emotional exhaustion limits capacity for Home Routines and Play.
- Parents operate in Parallel, functioning separately (Hirsch & Paquin, 2019).

Feeling isolated and drained

Clinical Consequence:

- Reduced family cohesion
- Lower Intervention Efficacy.

Problematic Marital dynamics



Bridging the Gap in Family-Centered Practice



The quasi-diagnostic language indicates system strain, not just individual stress.

- The Missing Link: FCP must address parents' Relational Capacity.
- Occupational therapists are not marriage counselors, but play a crucial role in interpreting family interactions, helping bridge gaps in communication and enhancing collaboration among family members to promote better support for autistic children.
- Goal shift from one child therapy to family system resilience.

Clinical Framework for Relational Intervention

Occupational Therapists as Translators of Family Function.



Decoding

Deconstruct Metaphors:
Reframing medical labels into
unmet occupational needs.

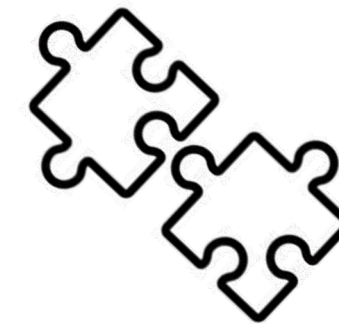
"What support
are you missing
when you say he
acts autistic?"



Adapting

Role Adaptation:
Using OPC to design routines
based on complementary
strengths.

- For instance, assigning concrete, repetitive occupational tasks to a father who exhibits systemizing strengths (Marriott et al., 2021).



Promoting

Co-Occupation:
Embedding shared tasks and
clear communication plans into
their home programs to foster
teamwork and cohesion
(Hock et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2025).

Conclusion



Toward Transformative Practice

Really Effective FCP

- Quasi-diagnostic language is a window into co-parenting barriers.
- Unaddressed marital strain erodes family cohesion and intervention outcomes.
- Occupational therapists must deliberately integrate marital system assessment into practice.
- Utilizing Occupational Performance Coaching (OPC), therapists guide parents in adapting their caregiving roles, fostering collaboration and resilience within family dynamics for improved outcomes.

Thank you!



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Contact Information:

Mei-Ni Hsiao: meinihsiao@ntu.edu.tw

Che-Liang Wu: cheliangwu@mx.nthu.edu.tw