In Appreciation: Eleanor Gibson

Thinking about Eleanor Gibson

Jackie's career was long and outstanding. It began in the 1930s when she was a woman scientist at an arduous task. Beginning in graduate school with a Yale professor, Jackie was allowed to stay for a year, but then had to resign. Her refusal to allow a woman in his lab, to years of being refused a regularly faculty position at Cornell, Jackie's career progress was blocked like that of many women of her time. We present our idea to break the outward trappings of being on the regular faculty and having tenure were denied, Jackie's research flourished. She published landmark journal articles and the book on reading during this period. Then finally in the 1970s when she was over 60, Cornell finally recognized the gem they had and she was appointed full professor. When Jackie came into her own, galvanizing the field of perceptual development with ingenious experiments on infants and exciting applications of ecological theory to developmental questions. After Jackie retired and moved to Middlebury, Vermont in 1987, I made many visits to see her. She was always curious about what people were working on, what were the questions being asked, and what were the most interesting studies coming out. We rarely talked about her accomplishments because she was an extremely modest person in that regard.

During a visit a couple of years ago Jackie and I had an exchange which I think characterized her attitude toward life, toward work, toward self-assessment. She was 90 years old at the time. The year before she had published a wonderful book on perceptual development, co-authored with Anne Pick. In the year of the visit, 2001, an autobiography had just come out. At one point she complained to me of having nothing to write, nothing to write. I said that if I were her, I would rent out my laurels. Jackie replied, "Oh, Rachel — you would never do that!" which of course was an understatement. It reminded me of something Jack Dukellis said in response to an interviewee’s question about which of his compositions was the greatest. Ellington replied, "The one I wrote on the way to the store." And so it was with Jackie. She always looked forward, and she remained vitally interested in science and in the lives of other people until the end of her life. During the same time described above, I left her with a preprint of a manuscript recently submitted to a journal. Several days later Jackie called me. After daily complimenting the article, she said she didn’t like the ending. "You let the reader down," she said, "because you never clearly state the bottom line. What do you think is the big conclusion from the study? You don't really say."

"After we hung up the phone," I thought, "she is absolutely correct in her assessment. The ending was limp and vague. I re-read the last two pages on her advice. She was teaching, thinking, the very end. I did not meet Jackie personally until around 1980, but during the last two decades she has been a cherished friend and mentor. What a scientist should be and what a human being should be.

—Rachel Kent

American Psychological Society

Life After the Lab

We were Jackie's graduate students at the end of her career after she had closed her famous lab at Cornell. Jackie was 77 years old when she became our mentor, an age when most academics are comfortably retired. The 15-year difference between her age and ours was an enormous generation gap that would normally preclude intellectual collaboration. But Jackie never treated her students like proper babies, of course, are asked by 7:30, and geographical choices (NC and NYC) may be ok for visiting but not, in Jackie's world view, until for residence. We, in turn, picked up on stimulation by her intellectual and personal problems to worry about.

In the late 1980s, Jackie became interested in the relationship between developing motor skills and perceptual learning. During this intellectual period, Dick Neisser invited Jackie to Emory University to work with students in his lab while he was away on sabbatical. For our first project, we converted Dick's office into a lab for blindfolded children to explore size and shape. After parents had to carry their infants up three flights of stairs past numerous scenes and church spires, it was the one time that parking their stroller was not an option. Research in this church lab yielded several interesting findings. As Jackie predicted, emerging motor skills paved the way for perceptual learning via new forms of exploration. In the object manipulation studies, babies with advanced manual skills matched the sights and sounds of actions with objects, but infants of the same age with limited manual skills explored indiscriminately. But infants require weeks of experience before they can use information gained via exploration to guide actions adaptively. In the locomotor studies, experienced crawling and walking infants matched their responses to the limits of their abilities, but novices plucked headfirst over the brink of impossible steps.

We pursued subsequent questions about perceptual learning, exploration, and development, with Jackie always supporting us and raising the bar for excellence. Although we knew that Jackie loved us and was proud of us, she was never effusive with praise. In Jackie's grading scale, "terrific" refers to the top 1 percent, "just fine" to the top 20 percent, and "Fine" to the top 90 percent. Recently, we sent Jackie a preprint to read. When Karen arrived home, her answering machine was blanking wildly. In the first message, Jackie said, "What a terrific article, so well done!" We had made it! In the second message, she added, "The top 1 percent at last!" However, after ruminating for 45 minutes, Jackie's next text message said, "Your paper is fine, but there are a few things I wanted to discuss..." And 30 minutes later, "Karen, dear, your paper with Marion is fine but you must fix it before you send it out." Karen erased the two later messages.

To our mutual benefit, we enjoyed frequent visits with Jackie at her home with her family and at our various labs. One fonddest memories of time with Jackie are the annual pilgrimages to Fiddy Island, SC. Each spring, the three of us met at Jackie's summer house where we spent the day fishing, swimming, and sunbathing in the beach mid-day, and drank vodka while arguing about perception of attendance at night. Jackie continues to be a guiding intellectual force in our lives. She was a dear and irrereplaceable friend. We miss her terribly.

—Karen Adolph and Marion Eppel

Gibson Was a Gifted Mentor

I came to Cornell in 1975, a place I had never heard of until I applied to graduate school. Within the first month, Eleanor Gibson (Figure 1) became my intellectual mentor. This interest led to a long-term, hands-on research. I helped an advanced student examine infants' phoneme discrimination using the nonreactive sucking paradigm. I learned from best practices, and I grew. While in graduate school, I learned to think divergent. Jackie's lab was busy. We had a grant that funded research on infants' perception of dynamic events. Lie Spence, Nancy Vanderzot, Jane Magee-Neil, Cynthia Oyser, Debra Clark, Lorraine Schick, Kate Loveland, and I worked together and also conducted our own research. We acted as observers for each other and met weekly with Jackie. At times it was daunting, 'You'd be discussing an idea or problem in a meeting, and one of the windows was open and you'd think, "Is she even listening to me?" But when you came in the next day, there would be a note and a hundred of articles that "might be useful." Last year I sent her a draft I was working on. A week later, it was returned along with three pages of notes. A few days after that, a postcard arrived with more references and the request that I continue to send her work, as she was becoming bored in her health-imposed isolation.

A particular strength of Jackie was her generosity, her willingness to help graduate students, and her ability to give input and advice. Jackie was unassuming, flexible, and willing to mentor graduate students as independent scholars. Lorraine Schick and I wanted to study infants' selective attention. We didn't know what to do. But she didn't like it! She wasn't sure just what the results would tell us or whether we would be adding to what was already known. Lorraine Neisser, Lorraine's supervisor, was more interested in her work. We had Jackie's full support. We tested the infants in Jackie's lab, used her equipment and supplies, and used the help of her research assistants. Jackie ended up preparing an important control experiment as well. She had the grace, the integrity, and the generosity to enable us to go our own way, and after our work, she helped in the study in our own publications.

There are many gifted mentors, but Jackie is especially notable for the loyalty of her students and colleagues who influenced her. Jackie was an outstanding model: Her work ethic, her determination, her raw intellect, and her dedication to the growth and development of students were exceptional. I try to make a point of introducing my students at meetings, because Jackie already did. At the International Conference on Infant Studies, my wife, Jackie, and I sat and chatted with them in the Botanical Garden. They were thrilled and I was especially honored and touched that they treated them as young colleagues. Such was her way.

—Arneil Walker-Anderson

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