

Eleanor J. Gibson

December 7, 1910 — December 30, 2002

Eleanor J. Gibson was the most distinguished developmental psychologist of her generation. Her early work on the “visual cliff” is still described in virtually every textbook. Gibson showed that young mobile animals of many species will avoid a visually specified drop-off even if they have had no prior visual experience, and that human infants do the same as soon as they can crawl. This was only the first of many empirical and theoretical contributions. Gibson’s path breaking 1969 book, *Principles of Perceptual Learning and Development*, was organized around the assumption that perceiving becomes more differentiated as well as more efficient as learning proceeds. This assumption represented a fundamental challenge to then-dominant theories of learning, but it has stood the test of time. *The Psychology of Reading*, published in 1975 (with Harry Levin), applied the same principles to the practical problems of reading and learning to read.

In 1973, Eleanor Gibson established a laboratory for the study of infant perception and action in the basement of the new social science building, Uris Hall. There she explored new concepts—intermodal invariants, affordances for locomotion, and others—that have since been widely accepted in developmental psychology. As the study of infant perception and learning became more and more popular, the Uris Hall laboratory became a model for other labs around the country. Many of those labs were established by—and are still directed by—Gibson’s former students. All her students cherish the memory of her unfailing kindness, warm friendship, and wise mentoring.

Eleanor Gibson came to Cornell in 1950 when her husband, James J. Gibson, was offered a professorship in the Psychology Department. So-called “nepotism rules” prevented her from receiving an academic appointment in her own right; for fifteen years she was only allowed to work as a Research Associate. Those were awkward times for women scholars: when Eleanor Gibson finally became Professor of Psychology in 1965, she was the only female full professor in the College of Arts and Sciences. In 1972, she became Susan Linn Sage Professor of Psychology—the first woman ever to hold an endowed chair at Cornell.

In Gibson’s later career, honors came thick and fast. A member of the National Academy of Sciences since 1971, she was made a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1977. Recipient of many awards and honorary degrees, she was awarded the National Medal of Science in 1992. Gibson remained intellectually active for many years after her official retirement from Cornell in 1979—developing new ideas, working with new students, writing new books. Scientifically, professionally, and personally, she will be sorely missed.