

## Ralph Gibson and his remarkable achievements in pediatric psychology

By Anne E. Kazak



Who were the earliest practicing pediatric psychologists, those whose interests and professional opportunities brought them into pediatric departments during the earliest years of pediatric psychology in the 1960s? An obituary in the *American Psychologist* for Ralph Gibson, PhD (Gibson, 2002) described an early leader in pediatric psychology.

Ralph Gibson was a pioneer. He was the first African-American member of the Board in Control of Intercollegiate Athletes and the first African American full Professor at the University of Michigan Medical School. Under his leadership, the first pediatric psychology section in a department of pediatrics was established. In 1965, he was appointed head of the Pediatric Psychology Unit at the University of Michigan Medical School. (p. 727)

Another obituary, in the University of Michigan (*The University Record*, 7/9/01) detailed additional accomplishments and positions Dr. Gibson held, including Assistant Dean for Student Affairs in the Medical School, many university awards and appointment to the National Advisory Child Health and Development Council of the National Institutes of Health. The Ralph M. Gibson Award at the University of Michigan honors him and is presented each year at commencement to a senior medical student who possesses Gibson's qualities and "has a dedication to addressing the health disparities experienced by minority and disadvantaged populations in the United States."

Gibson was a leader in pediatric psychology at a major medical school at a time when most pediatric psychologists were forging their initial contacts and collaborations with

pediatricians and around the time that the early formative papers about pediatric psychology (e.g., Kagan, 1965; Wright, 1967) were published. He spent his entire career at Michigan (BS 1945; MS 1947; PhD 1959) and headed one of the first pediatric psychology programs in a Department of Pediatrics, recognized in the University of Michigan Faculty History Project by the following quote: “under his direction, pediatric psychology services began to have a major impact on patient care” (University of Michigan Faculty Research Project).

Gibson’s son John spoke about his father’s passion and commitment to children, his focus on clinical care, and his particular interest in blind infants (J. Gibson, personal communication, November 20, 2014). He indicated that his father’s interest in pediatric psychology likely developed from his early work in child welfare in Cleveland. At Michigan he worked clinically with children with a wide range of birth defects and focused particularly on infants and young children. He also collaborated with child psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg and published a detailed developmental study of search behavior in a blind infant (Fraiberg, Siegel, & Gibson, 1966).

John Gibson also provided a letter written by Edward M. Schwartz, PhD, a mentee and a long-time colleague of Ralph Gibson’s at Michigan, to the Gibson family (including Dr. Gibson’s widow Rose and his eldest son Ralph Jr.) in 2002. He reflects warmly on Dr. Gibson’s teaching and mentoring, “I can say with some degree of pride, however, that Ralph’s clinical skills live on. I have had the pleasure and honor of teaching and passing along the ‘Ralph Gibson Approach’ to scores of would-be child psychologists over the years in Pediatrics. No doubt, then, his spirit lives on in many hospitals, clinical and practices although I must admit that I believe no one will ever be as adept as Ralph in having such a large impact in the lives of troubled children within a remarkably short period of time.”

A former colleague at Michigan. Oscar Barbarin, PhD, who was in the School of Social Work at Michigan from 1979-2001 wrote, “He had a sterling reputation as a clinician. He was especially well known and highly sought after for his effectiveness as a child therapist but was unassuming. My personal impression is that he was a kind, gentle and humble man who at the same time exuded great energy and optimism. He was generous with his time toward younger scholars/clinicians.” (Barbarin, personal communication, June 4, 2014). Eileen Mollen, PhD, who was mentored by Gibson concurs, “Ralph was generous with

support and advocacy for me personally, and for medical students and residents. He was invested in the success of others.” (Mollen, personal communication, December 8, 2014).

Dr. Gibson was indeed a pioneer in pediatric psychology who practiced in a thoughtful and innovative manner at a time when the field was in the earliest stages of defining itself. His establishment of a pediatric psychology program in a Department of Pediatrics was remarkable and is significant in our history.

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