Mesibov, Gary B.

Major Areas
Gary B. Mesibov has dedicated his career as a psychologist to autism. His contributions include a major assessment instrument; a book series; a comprehensive program of educational, vocational, residential, and family support services; and a unique, training program for other professionals. His reputation among students, families, and professional colleagues is one of wisdom, generosity, compassion, and amazing productivity. He brings intellectual rigor to his professional activities and combines it with gentleness and respect for all clients, as he helps them to live happy, productive lives in spite of their developmental differences.

Landmark Contributions
Gary B. Mesibov received his A.B. degree from Stanford University and his M.A. from the University of Michigan. He defended his doctoral dissertation in psychology at Brandeis University in the spring of 1974. Shortly thereafter, he arrived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a postdoctoral fellow in the Division for Disorders of Development and Learning (DDDL). Gary's time at the DDDL marked the beginning of his professional identification with the field of developmental disabilities. Recognized as a gifted and prolific psychologist, after only 18 months Gary was asked to accept a staff position at the DDDL. Gary's quiet passion for understanding and serving people with developmental disabilities soon led to professional involvement with newly developing service models in North Carolina, including group homes, sheltered workshops, limited guardianship, and social skills training, as well as service on a human rights committee at the regional residential facility for people with severe/profound intellectual disabilities. Gary conducted research, introduced students to the rewards and fascinations of developmental disabilities, and worked closely with clients and families. At the same time, he was teaching in the department of psychology, supervising interns and postdoctoral fellows in the department of psychiatry, and devoting considerable time and effort to the development of the Society of Pediatric Psychology (Section 5 of the American Psychological Association's Division 12).

Chapel Hill had long been a center of excellence in the field of developmental disabilities. In addition to the DDDL’s broad-based training program in developmental disabilities, a small, psychoanalytically oriented program on autism had functioned for some years within the department of psychiatry. In 1966, this program was expanded and refocused by Eric Schopler and Robert Reichler, on the assumptions that autism was a neurobiological disorder and that parents and professionals could work as co-therapists to help children with autism develop. In 1972, that program was renamed TEACCH and funded by the North Carolina General Assembly as the nation’s first statewide autism program.

Eric recruited Gary in 1979 to assume the new position of coordinator of adolescent and adult services at Division TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children). Four years later, Gary became associate director; five years later, co-director; and in 1992, with Eric Schopler's semi-retirement, director of Division TEACCH. Gary served in this position for 18 years until his retirement in 2010. This was a formative period for the organization, as it grew to nine regional centers across the state of North Carolina, serving thousands of individuals on the autism spectrum. It was also a period of both
broadening and deepening TEACCH's philosophical underpinnings and, as a result, its approach to intervention for individuals with autism. Eric had first understood the importance of using structure to help children with autism focus and learn; Gary elaborated on the principles of structured teaching and applied them to classroom, vocational, and residential settings. He also emphasized the importance of improving the quality of life for individuals on the autism spectrum, not merely addressing “deficits” or “behavior problems.” In 2004, Gary co-authored *The TEACCH Approach to Autism Spectrum Disorders* as an introduction to the TEACCH philosophy, structured teaching, and its application across a wide range of contexts.

From 1983 until 1998, Gary and Eric co-edited the “Current Issues in Autism” series for Plenum Press. These books were based on the yearly TEACCH conference, held in Chapel Hill each May. The conference has drawn noted autism experts such as Margaret Bauman, Eric Courchesne, Geraldine Dawson, Christopher Gillberg, Cathy Lord, Sally Ozonoff, Michael Rutter, Wendy Stone, and Lorna Wing. Conference speakers uniformly, and quite independently, speak with affection and admiration for Gary's contributions. Throughout the years, he has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to maintain warm, personal relationships with professionals around the world.

Like most respected academics, Gary began to be asked to give talks or provide training outside his hometown. In the late 1970s, his talks were in rural North Carolina, with occasional well-timed presentations at the Atlantic coast in the summer. By the 1980s, he was accepting invitations to Kentucky, Ohio, Georgia, Florida, and Oregon. During this time, he was also developing a unique, weeklong, multimodal training program for teachers and other professionals working with students with autism. Gary and a training team would arrive at a location on Sunday, set up a model classroom with local students with autism on Monday morning, and take turns giving didactic lectures and operating the classroom. The trainees would observe trainers working with the students and then take over themselves, designing and presenting teaching activities that put into practice the principles they had been hearing in the lectures. After the students went home for the day, there would be small-group and large-group debriefings of what trainees had tried, what had worked, and what hadn't worked. This model classroom has been presented every summer since 1985, training more than 2,000 teachers of students with autism. Gary and his teams have also presented the classroom and other types of training in Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, England, France, Hong Kong, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Venezuela.

Gary was also involved in developing the Adolescent and Adult Psychoeducational Profile (AAPEP), an assessment instrument for adolescents and adults with autism. In 2007, he and his colleagues issued a major revision of the instrument, renamed the TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP), in order to assess more accurately the skills needed for successful employment in community settings and to promote independent functioning in the home, workplace, and community. Gary's vision and leadership have been the impetus behind TEACCH's Supported Employment Program, which continues to be one of the most successful such programs in the nation for adults with autism.

Gary served for 10 years as editor of the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* and on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Pediatric Psychology, Journal of Clinical Child*
Psychology, and Journal of Cognitive Rehabilitation, in addition to being a guest reviewer for almost a dozen other journals. Over his career, Gary has earned a reputation as someone who can translate basic research into everyday practice. In recent years, he has helped the autism community think carefully about “evidence-based practice” and how this concept can be applied to specific autism interventions, as well as broad-based program models.

Gary's many professional awards demonstrate his commitment to advancing the science and practice of psychology, while maintaining a clear focus on improving quality of life for individuals with autism across the lifespan. For example, in 1998, Gary received the American Psychological Association's Distinguished Professional Contributions Award for Public Service. In 2000, he received an honorary degree from the University of Mons-Hainaut (Belgium) for “contributions to improving the quality of life for people with autism throughout the world.” In 2006, Gary received the University of North Carolina's Chancellor’s Award for “meritorious accomplishments” on behalf of the University. In 2010, he was named “Professional of the Year” by the Danish Autism Society for “doing the most to advance treatment and education of people with autism spectrum disorders.” Also in 2010, Gary received the Autism Society of America Founders Award for “career substantive contributions to the field of autism spectrum disorders.” These are just the highlights from a career marked by recognition from parents and professionals alike.

Since stepping down as director of Division TEACCH, Gary has found a bit more time for his grandchildren, but he has not lost his passion for improving the quality of life for individuals with autism, particularly for adolescents and adults. He continues to inspire the TEACCH staff and the autism community at large to embrace “the culture of autism” as a metaphor for understanding the unique qualities of the children, adolescents and adults we serve.

See also
TEACCH, Eric Schopler

References and Readings