

An Introduction to Perceptual Theory: A Theoretical Explanation of Individual Human Behavior

Sean-Jason Schat

Redeemer University

Abstract

Invitational Theory is rooted in three theoretical foundations, the perceptual tradition, self-concept theory, and a democratic ethos (Purkey, Novak, and Fretz, 2020). This essay focuses in on the first of these foundations, which the author intentionally describes as *perceptual theory*. Perceptual theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding and explaining human behaviour, and could provide very important insights into the offering and receiving of invitations. In this essay the author seeks to re-introduce the Invitational community to this important theoretical foundation, which could profoundly and positively impact the enacting and application of invitational theory. The author begins by providing an overview of perceptual theory, exploring some of the central tenets and implications. The author then reviews the history of the development of the theory, which the author believes has been overlooked and by-passed: not enough people know about perceptual theory. The author introduces a number of perceptual theory basics, which can be a helpful way of introducing the theory. The essay concludes with an exploration of a number of potential implications and applications for the Invitational community.

Key Words: *Invitational Theory, Invitational Education, Perceptual Theory, The Perceptual Tradition, Perceptual Psychology, Perceptual-Experiential Psychology, A Field Approach to Psychology*

Introduction

Invitational Education theory rests firmly on three interconnected but distinct theoretical foundations: *the perceptual tradition, self-concept theory*, and a *democratic ethos* (Purkey, Novak, & Fretz, 2020). Fully understanding and applying invitational theory requires an appropriate acknowledgement and consideration of each of these distinct foundations. Each theoretical approach offers something of unique and significant value to a theory that seeks to integrate them all. Our invitational practices are likely to be enriched by the process.

One of the things that has become clear to me after over 25 years working in education and educational leadership is that we can too easily overlook theory. Of course education is rooted in effective practice. Theory is NOT everything. Indeed, this gets to the heart of the invitational approach: an invitation does not happen in theory, it is experienced—a direct transition from theory to practice. An invitation only occurs when it is both enacted by the *inviter* and experienced by the *invited*! However, a good theory has value because it can help us to better understand the nature and impact of our practice. Indeed, a well-developed theoretical foundation can help us more

carefully attend to both the perceptions of our practice, as well as the way in which others perceive and experience our actions. In my experience, too often educational practices are rooted in an incomplete knowledge and awareness of the theoretical foundations that underlie them. This is unfortunate, because a rich and fully-developed understanding of a theory is likely to lead to more effective practice, and more strategic, intentional, and effective application. We see this in many areas in education today. Having students work in groups is not the same as carefully structured cooperative learning. Inquiry-based learning does not simply involve establishing a discovery-rooted context and providing hands-on manipulatives for students to work with. Using differentiated instruction does not simply mean providing three different assignment options. In each case, there is “more to it than that.” Yet too many practitioners develop their own practice based on an incomplete theoretical foundation. To a certain extent, this can actually undermine the intended power and impact of the original theory, contributing to the pendulum swings that too often characterize educational initiatives.

Through this essay readers are provided an overview of **perceptual theory**, one of the three theoretical foundations of invitational theory. Described by Purkey (1992) as “perceptual tradition” herein the word “theory” is intentionally retained to highlight that the approach *seeks to provide a theoretical explanation for human perception and resultant behavior*. In this context, it is a theory that informs how Invitational Education theory is practiced. There is great value for the educational community to better understand some of the key tenets of this theoretical approach. Therefore, readers are intentionally invited to gain a richer understanding of perceptual theory in relation to how it can inform and shape invitational practices.

A. How Perceptual Theory Explains Human Behavior

The psychology discipline has a rich history in seeking to understand and explain human behavior. *Why do people do the things they do?* Each person has their own way of looking at the world, and this has a direct bearing on their actions and decisions. If we want to understand human behavior, we need to understand why people do the things they do. In the culminating articulation of his theory, Combs (1999) points out, “People do not behave according to the facts as *others* see them. They behave according to the facts as *they* see them” (p. 19). Combs describes his approach as “perceptual” because it draws attention to the significant role individual perception plays when it comes to their behavior. All behavior is a symptom of perception.

Why We Need Theory

This essay began by acknowledging that theory, which by itself only has value if it leads to theory-informed practice. This is not meant to undermine the importance of a good theory. It is simply a reminder that for theory to have value, it must lead to action. The author frequently notes that people working in the helping professions are not always able to articulate the theoretical foundations that undergird their actions, informing their choices and serving as an important touchstone and guide for their decision-making processes. As observed by one of Magnuson’s participants (2012), this was perhaps one of Combs’s greatest contributions:

He provided that coherent body of understanding better than any stuff that I know. For me that’s always been the most important contribution ever of perceptual psychology. It gives a coherent thorough underpinning to counseling practice, to teaching, to learning. (p. 47)

In a posthumous publication co-authored by Anne Richards, a former student and co-author of Combs noted, “The purpose of theory is to make it possible to deal effectively with problems” (Combs & Richards, 2010, p. 101). Perceptual theory precisely does this, providing a theoretical approach for understanding and dealing with human behavior.

Why Do People Do What They Do?

The scope of human history is replete with examples of the very strange and often inexplicable things people do. We often look back at events of the past and marvel at the ridiculous choices people made. Perceptual theory reminds us that every behavior makes sense to the behavior in the moment of behaving. Even the most illogical decisions made sense in the moment to the person making their decision. This distinction is an important one in seeking to understand and learn from human history. It is also very important for human relationships and interactions in the present.

The recent global COVID 19 pandemic has served as a powerful reminder of the fact that human beings behave in strange ways that, to them, makes sense. These behaviors can have a potent impact on relationships and the perceptions and behaviors of the people around them. For instance, differences of opinion over pandemic-related issues led to disagreements, significant tension, and even violence or increased death. Families were torn apart over disagreements about beliefs related to vaccinations and pandemic protocols. Responding to the pandemic became significantly politicized, sometimes driving a wedge through the heart of communities.

Throughout the pandemic, the author was struck by the fundamental role perception played in observed human behavior. It was evident that people’s actions made sense to them based on their perceptions and beliefs. These observations inspired this current essay.

This writer believes Perceptual Theory has been historically overlooked for a variety of reasons. Perhaps, too few people know enough about perceptual theory. Yet, perceptual theory has a lot to offer in relation to understanding and responding to human behavior.

Humans live in an increasingly global, glocal, multicultural, and pluralistic interconnected culture. Philosophically speaking, many now believe that “reality” itself is *constructed*. Perceptually speaking, the way individuals understand and experience reality is *perceptual*. Given this context, you are invited to this re-introduction of perceptual theory as a resource for better understanding others’ perspectives and why people do what they do.

All Behavior Makes Sense to the Behavior in the Moment of Behaving

A central tenet of Combs’s theory is the recognition that every behavior makes sense to the person exhibiting the observed behavior within the context of the moment. This essential distinction is easily overlooked. Indeed, when we respond to the behavior of others, we often respond directly to the behavior, overlooking the fact that their behavior is a symptom of their perception. Crucially, there is a reason for what was done and it is important to recognize and consider the person’s perspective of the context.

From the point of view of the behavior herself, behavior is caused. It is purposeful. It always has a reason. Sometimes the reasons are vague and confused, in which case behavior is equally vague and uncertain; sometimes the meanings are extremely clear and definite. But everything we do seems reasonable and necessary at the time we are doing it. (Combs, 1999, p. 19)

Therefore, every behavior has a cause, emerging directly from the way the individual perceives reality. It is certainly possible that the individual may later recognize their behavior was inappropriate. But in the moment in which the behavior was exhibited, the actions made sense..

Even our own behavior viewed in retrospect may seem to have been crazy, silly, or ineffective, *but at the instant of behaving* our actions seem to us to be the best and most effective ones we can carry out under the circumstances. (Richards, 2021, p. 21—italics in original).

The Individual's Perceptual Field and Its Impact on Others

Combs's theory has been described as a "field approach" because it suggests that each individual has a unique perceptual field. Fortunately, Combs (1999) describes this approach in further detail:

A field is a device widely used in science to deal with forces or events that are not clearly understood and cannot be observed directly but nevertheless behave in observable, even predictable ways. A familiar example is the field of a magnet or electric current. Although we do not know the exact nature and dynamics of magnets or electric currents, we can work with them anyhow because they behave in observable and predictable fashion. The fact that an event can be utilized in an orderly way is sufficient to make it useful to modern science. Whatever its origin, the field of an organization has its own reality. That is to say, a field can be treated as an event in its own right and can be studied without reference to the material events that brought it into being. (p. 17)

Certainly recognition of the nature and impact of each person's unique perceptual field is a powerful resource for understanding individual human behavior. However, because our fields interact, it is also an essential consideration when seeking to understand human interactions.

But unless I wish to believe that my own phenomenal field is the only thing that exists and that other people have no existence except as parts of it, I must believe that the phenomenal fields of any two individuals are somehow connected. In other words, changes in my own field are often accompanied by behavior on the part of others which indicates that a change has also take place in their phenomenal fields. (Combs & Richards, 2010, p. 15)

Accepting this element of perceptual theory is quite significant for any system that seeks to explore individual human behavior and its impact on the behavior of others. Individually we have our own perceptions of reality. Since we share the same world, these collective realities intersect. As a result, individual perceptions and behaviors have the power to influence the perceptions and behaviors of others and vice versa.

Reading Behavior Backwards and the Legitimacy of Inference

Another central tenet of perceptual theory is that we can read behavior backwards in order to identify the perceptions that caused the behavior. It is far easier, of course, to simply respond to the behavior. However, it is important for people to learn to look beyond the surface behavior to identify and understand the causal perceptions.

Observing other people's behavior (including, of course, what they have to say, which is a kind of behavior, too), we are able to make something of what they are

feeling, and this makes it possible for us to understand something of the nature of the perceptual field that lies behind their actions. (Combs, 1999, pp. 65-66)

Applying perceptual theory requires the observer to make inferences, drawing conclusions about the underlying perceptions on the basis of observed behavior. The process of inferential learning has a rich legacy in the scientific community. By carefully observing the behavior of individuals over time, we are able to gain insights into the underlying perceptions that led to the behavior. It is important that this process be done wisely and strategically, not haphazardly. Richards (2021) points out that in perceptual theory, “this form of inference is termed **“reading behavior backwards”** and, when mindfully used, is a useful tool for understanding our own behavior as well as the behavior of others” (pp 26-27—boldface in original).

This process can provide reliable and legitimate data, provided we do so “with the same discipline, care, and rigor demanded of science in any other field of exploration” (Combs et al., 1969, p. 70). This distinction cannot be overlooked, as it is also possible to mis-apply this element. That can result in quickly drawing conclusions about other people’s perceptions based on a superficial or incomplete observation of behaviors.

Influencing Behavioral Change

Perceptual theory stresses our goal is not to seek to control the behaviors of others. However, in some situations, we may be positioned to influence the behavior of others, which is appropriate in some relationships (particularly the “helping relationships” that often applied Combs’s theory, as we shall see in a moment). Reading behavior backwards allows the observer to draw inferences from what they see. Combs (1999) wrote, “through the use of inference from people’s behavior it is often possible to obtain valuable insights into the nature of persons. That understanding, in turn, makes it possible to construct appropriate strategies for effecting behavior change” (p. 66). Of course, the key is to position the individual to willingly change the perception, which typically leads to a change in behavior. It is also essential that the goal of a helping practitioner support the goal for self-actualization and opportunity to flourish.

Self-As-Instrument

Providing opportunities for individuals to make changes in their behavior is a central focus for the helping professions, which include teaching, nursing, social work, and counseling. Such professionals often apply Combs’s theory, recognizing the pivotal distinction between perception and behavior as essential for helping individuals change the way they *look* at the world, which, in turn, changes the way they *act* within the world.

Relying upon their own perceptions and expertise, Combs and Soper (1963) coined the term *self-as-instrument* to describe the process by which an observer applies the reading behavior backward process. As Richards (2021) notes, “the primary tool that helpers work with is themselves” (p. 17). To make the link between the term and the theory it serves, Combs and Richards (2010) stressed:

“the essence of successful professional work is itself a matter of the use of the self as an effective instrument, rather than questions of methods or information. But whether or not workers are able to use themselves well as instruments in the helping professions is also a function of the helpers’ own perceptions.” (p. 59)

The Perceptions of Effective Helpers

One of the most important insights that emerges from perceptual theory research was the identification of perceptions of effective helpers. Effectiveness is identified in contrast to the perceptions of those who are deemed not effective. Practitioners of perceptual theory have been careful to distinguish between knowledge, methods, and perceptions. The assumption often is that a helping professional's knowledge or methods make the difference. Combs's research and theory shows that this is not the case. What ultimately makes the difference is the perceptions of the helping professional, which also shapes how knowledge is used and applied as methodology. Richards (2021) summarized four primary perceptions:

- **Perceptions of Self** as **identified** or deeply and meaningfully-related to persons of every description rather than as **unidentified** or apart from others.
- **Perceptions of Others** as **able** or having the capacities to deal with their problems and make their own decisions rather than as **unable** to do so.
- **Perceptions of Purpose** in terms of **larger** implications and concerns rather than **smaller**, narrower, or more specific goals.
- **Perceptions in an overall Frame of Reference** reflecting primary concern for the personal experiences of **people** and their welfare as human beings rather than impersonal matters or **things**, such as order, management details, and mechanics (Wasiesko, Wirtz, & Resor, 2009, p. 26). (pp. 28-29)

B. Considering Why Perceptual Theory is Often Overlooked

Perceptual Theory is primarily rooted in the work of Art Combs, a psychologist who initially introduced the theory as a needed counterbalance to behaviorist explanations of human behavior in the 1950s and 1960s. Although his work received some uptake at the time, for the most part it was rejected by the behaviorist-dominated profession of psychology of his era, something that I believe still influences the reception of his theory today. As a result, Combs eventually shifted his focus to a variety of helping professions (e.g., therapists, counsellors, teachers, and pastors) who drew heavily on his theory, often with striking results. Many of his subsequent publications focused on the helping professions. Combs's work was particularly well-received in education, resulting in a number of leadership opportunities. Toward the end of his life, Combs returned to his original discipline with a final publication (Combs, 1999) that pulled together a lifetime of work with perceptual theory.

1. Introducing Perceptual Theory to the World of Psychology

When Combs began his work, behaviorist approaches dominated the discipline. Most psychologists typically examined behavior externally, from the point of view of an outside observer. The interaction of stimulus and response was the primary dynamic by which psychology sought to explain behavior and personality. For a young science eagerly straining for recognition as a legitimate discipline, that frame of reference had much to commend it. Stimuli and response could be observed directly and measured with high degrees of precision. (Combs & Richards, 2006, p. 87)

However, Combs also observed that a “discipline limited to external observation cannot deal effectively with such matters as emotion, motivation, feelings, attitudes, hopes, fears, desires, aspirations, or personal experience, the very qualities that make us human” (Combs & Richards,

2006, p. 87). Combs appreciated the rich history of the discipline, particularly for its ability to describe general patterns of human behavior. However, Combs was concerned that it did not sufficiently explain individual human behavior.

In the 1940s, Combs discovered the work of Donald Syngg (1941), which encouraged him to recognize the potential for an alternative to the behaviorist paradigm.

Over 80 years ago, Donald Syngg (1941), expressing his own concerns about the state of theory and research in psychology, pointed out that psychologists had failed to appreciate that behavior could be studied from two different frames of reference: objectively, from the point of view of an outside observer; or "from the point of view of the behaving organism itself" (p. 406). Looking at people from the outside, as though they were objects, you might come up with particular understandings or conclusions. But, seeking to put yourself in their shoes and looking at the world as they see it, you were likely to arrive at very different conclusions. (Richards, 2021, p. 14)

Eventually, the two collaborated, leading to their first theoretical publication, entitled, "Individual behavior: A new frame of reference for psychology" (Syngg & Combs, 1949). Their revised edition (Combs & Syngg, 1959) described their theory as a "perceptual approach to behavior." The third edition, written by Combs and two of his students (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976) refers to the theory as "Perceptual psychology: A humanistic approach to the study of persons." The potentially confusing change in labels were later acknowledged. "During the years since it was initially proposed, the frame of reference it described has been referred to by varying names (e.g., a 'personal,' 'phenomenological,' 'perceptual,' 'perceptual-experiential,' or a 'field' approach)" (Combs & Richards, 2006, p. 3.)

2. The Emerging Humanistic Paradigm

Magnuson (2012) suggests that "Combs was among the first theorists to offer a bridge between the polarized beliefs of the humanists and the behaviorists" (p. 40). When perceptual theory was introduced in the 1940s, it faced fierce opposition from the behaviorist tradition. However, when psychology began to leave behaviorism behind in the 1970s, perceptual theory was again sidelined, because people did not want to lock themselves into another overarching theoretical system.

The psychology profession was slowly shifting across the spectrum from a behavioristic frame of reference to a more humanistic orientation. The progress, however, was very slow. Most humanist psychologists were more certain about what they were against than how their concerns and efforts were associated with a theoretical framework. They turned away from behaviorism with such determination as to reject any suggestion of becoming involved with anything that smacked of a theoretical system or school of thought." (Combs and Richards, 2006, p. 230)

From this side of the historical narrative, however, we can see that Combs was part of a coalescing humanistic paradigm. Combs & Richards (2006) note that "Similar stirrings toward a more humanistic approach to human problems were occurring in other disciplines as well, especially in anthropology, sociology, political science, theology, and medicine" (p. 87). Eventually, this new paradigm was described as the humanistic movement. Magnuson (2012) note

that “Even though Combs’s presence in the founding of humanistic psychology, counseling, and education was prominent, his name rarely appears in contemporary literature” (p. 34). Boeree (1998) offers a partial suggestion, noting that

Sometimes, a theory fails to gain the attention it deserves because it is too simple, too clear, too practical. Snygg and Combs' theory is a good example. Although it has had a quiet impact on a number of humanists, it didn't have the "pizzazz" other theories did. (para. 1)

3. Shifting to the Helping Professions

After struggling with the opposition of the discipline for a number of years, Combs finally realized that the behaviorist mindset was too firmly entrenched to objectively consider other approaches, including his own focus on individual behavior and perception. However, his theory had been well-received by people involved in the helping professions, such as teaching, counseling, social work, nursing, public service, and pastoral ministry. Combs (1999) notes that his approach “was widely used by applied workers, but largely ignored by theoretical and academic psychologists” (p. vii). Recognizing that the helping professions were not only using his theory, but were seeing significant positive outcomes, Combs shifted his focus to the helping professions (Combs, Avila, & Purkey, 1971), particularly education (Combs et al., 1969). As Richards and Gonzalez (2000) note, Combs was recognized by the American Psychological Association for “ground-breaking contributions to psychological theory, education reform, and research in the helping professions” (p. 1150).

4. Focused research in education

Combs’s shift from the discipline of psychology to applying his theoretical work in the field of education occurred when the program he had developed at Syracuse University was closed down, prompting him to move to Florida State University. In Combs and Richards (2006), Combs described this significant transition:

When I moved from Syracuse to Florida, I shifted energies from the development and dissemination of theory to the applications of perceptual thinking for education. This was partly due to the rejection from psychologists that I experienced in the destruction of our program at Syracuse. It was also a function of the warm reception accorded perceptual-experiential thinking throughout education, which assuaged my sense of injury on one hand and encouraged my work in education on the other. (p. 220)

Combs and his colleagues began to extend the implications of his theoretical work to the characteristics of effective teachers. Initially, they assumed that teacher knowledge was a key element in distinguishing between effective and ineffective educators. This did not prove to be the case. So they shifted their focus to instructional methods. But this, too, was not successful. Instead, they discovered that the key difference between effective and ineffective teachers was teacher perceptions. This transition was described by Magnuson (2012):

A hallmark of Combs’s research related to identification of excellent teachers’ qualities and the best practices for educating young minds. He and his colleagues began the investigation with the assumption that knowledge was an essential difference between effective and ineffective teachers. However, they found minimal difference in the knowledge base of the two groups. Their second

hypothesis was that methods were the significant factor. Again, they were not able to identify effective teachers and ineffective teachers by observing methods. Thus, they focused their inquiry on unobservable factors such as the participants' beliefs (Siu-Runyon, 2000). Differences between effective and ineffective teachers became readily apparent when they examined these personal qualities. (pp. 39-40)

5. Perceptions of Effective Helpers

Recognizing that teacher effectiveness could be distinguished on the basis of teacher perceptions proved to be a watershed moment for perceptual theory. Combs and his colleagues (1969) developed a number of research studies focused on refining and clarifying this important distinction. They discovered that effective teachers can be distinguished by "their **perceptions**, especially those we call values, beliefs, and purposes" (Combs et al., 1971, p. 6—boldface in original). As noted earlier, these include:

- (1) perceptions of self (as identifying or not identifying with others),
- (2) perceptions of others (as capable or incapable of making their own choices),
- (3) perceptions of purpose (as large or small in scope), and perceptions of an overall frame of reference or worldview (either focusing primarily on people or on things).

Each of these perceptions is distinct and has a marked impact on behavior. Other studies by Combs and his colleagues explored the nature and impact of effective and ineffective practitioners in the various helping professions. For example, Combs and Gonzalez (1994) recognized that these same characteristics distinguished between effective and ineffective counselors, ministers, nurses, and managers. Combs himself noted "in later years I was to extend this hypothesis to make a case for the essential unity of all helping professions." (Combs & Richards, 2006, p. 92)

The perceptions of effective helpers identified by Combs and particularly the distinction that effectiveness is based on the helper's perceptions rather than their knowledge or methods is foundational to an Invitational Education approach. This is something that continues to confound the discourse in many disciplines, where the assumption is often made that helper knowledge or helper methods are what matter most. Although often overlooked or under-valued, the research of Combs and his colleagues proved helper perceptions truly make a difference.

6. Returning to Psychology

As noted earlier, Art Combs and his crowning achievement, the articulation of perceptual theory as a resource for better understanding human behavior, have been historically under-recognized and underappreciated. As noted earlier, this essay serves as a means for re-introducing perceptual theory to modern readers. As a pioneer of Invitational Education (IE) theory, Purkey (1992) acknowledges Combs and Perceptual Theory as part of IE's conceptual framework.

We all know, timing is everything. Part of the reason Combs and his work related to Perceptual Theory has been overlooked is because his theoretical work was developed and evolved at a time when the behaviorist tradition had a stranglehold on theoretical explanations of human behavior. Another element is that he left the discipline and explored the application of his theory exclusively in the helping profession. However, clearly Combs longed for his theory to be recognized within the discipline of psychology. The APA's belated recognition of his landmark work in the helping professions (Richards & Gonzalez, 2000) certainly accorded some posthumous recognition and respect.

Combs himself hoped for more. He believed that his theoretical work provided important insights into individual human behavior that could be applied across the discipline. Before the end of his life, Combs (1999) believed that the changing landscape in psychology provided an opportunity for this to happen:

With the collapse of behaviorism, psychology is in need of a comprehensive theoretical framework capable of bringing together the work of its scientists and those practicing in the applied fields of human activity. I believe the time is ripe for a more general application of field theory in the profession, and this book is my contribution to that end. (p. viii)

Combs' perception (1999) resulted in his explication of three reasons that supported his belief:

- (1) The failure of behaviorism to adequately serve as a way of understanding and explaining human behavior.
- (2) The very real needs of workers in applied fields to understand the causes of human behavior.
- (3) The increased use of field theory in modern science, which allows for the positing of field-based explanations for what is otherwise unobservable, could be extended to the field of psychology.

Indeed, Combs' theoretical framework has the potential to pull together many different threads in the emerging discourse:

calling attention to the paradigm shift of psychology from behaviorism to self psychology, humanistic psychology, phenomenological, etc. All are based on a common thread: a perceptual field view. I am suggesting the profession takes steps to dialogue and explore perception as a basis for all psychology. (Combs & Richards, 2006, p. 306)

7. Direct Impacts of Interest to the Invitational Community

Combs took his relationships with his students seriously and provided many opportunities for them to contribute to the emergence of perceptual theory through their own research and projects. The Invitational Education community will especially find three specific initiatives to be note-worthy. Mark Wasicsko's (cf., 2005, 2007, etc.) exploration of the dispositions of effective teachers, Anne Richards's (2021) contribution to the mediation discourse, and William Purkey and John Novak's (cf., 1978, 1992, 2015, 2020, etc.) articulation of Invitational Theory. Each author was a student of Art Combs. His imprint can be clearly seen in their subsequent work. Each will be further explored below:

Wasicsko's Work on Dispositions of Effective Teachers

As noted, Mark Wasicsko studied under Combs. Wasicsko continued to expand and develop Combs's research into teacher perceptions. Wasicsko has shifted the language slightly, exploring the *dispositions* of effective teachers, building directly on the *perceptions* identified by Combs and his colleagues. As Richards (2021) notes,

During the past two decades, Perceptual theory has been used extensively as a basis for exploring helping professionals' *dispositions* (attitudes and beliefs) as well as for selecting candidates for admission to licensure and advanced degree programs

in education (Wasicsko, 2005, 2007; Wasicsko et al., 2009; Allen, Wasicsko, & Chirichello, 2014). (p. 30)

Richards's Work on Perceptions and Mediation

Anne Richards, who studied under Combs and, along with her husband, co-authored two of the editions of Combs's theory (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976; Combs, Richards, and Richards, 1988), has also continued to advance perceptual theory and the legacy of Art Combs. Richards (2021) explores the mediation discourse, building on Combs's identification of the perceptions of essential helpers. Richards (2021) notes that, as has been the case in other disciplines, in seeking to explain mediator effectiveness, the mediation discourse has often focused "on examining strategies, techniques, methods, or behaviors of mediators in their practice of mediation. Unfortunately, research along these lines has not produced results distinguishing which practices are reliably associated with mediator effectiveness" (p. x). In her monograph, Richards explores perceptual theory and draws attention to the need to focus on mediator perceptions. Mediator behaviors – the strategies, techniques, and methods employed – are clearly rooted in mediator perceptions. Richards (2021) notes, "it seems likely that greater success will be found by grounding future research on mediator effectiveness in theory focusing on exploration of the perceptions mediators bring to their work" (p. x). Importantly, Richards (2021) concludes her monography by noting that

Perceptual psychological theory, with its accompanying inferential methodology for research purposes, appears to show greater promise for determining the effectiveness of mediators than past studies have yet achieved or may be capable of achieving in the future. (p. 35)

Purkey and Novak's Work on Invitational Theory

Without their conceptual and theoretical contributions, Invitational Theory and Invitational Education would not exist. Purkey and Novak both studied under Combs and consistently identified the perceptual tradition as one of the three foundations of Invitational Theory (cf. Purkey, 1978; Purkey, 1992; Purkey & Novak, 2015; Purkey, Novak, & Fretz, 2020). Recognizing the nature and implications of Combs's work provides an important theoretical foundation and key conceptions that serve as a touchstone and guide for practitioners of Invitational Education theory.

C. Perceptual Psychology Basics

This writer experienced several opportunities to introduce perceptual theory to others in a variety of settings. While a longer introduction such as this document can play an important role in establishing context and exploring the historical roots and narrative of the theory, it should be helpful to focus on "Perceptual Theory Basics" (Figure 1). In this section, we further explore each of the basics.

Figure 1: *Perceptual Theory Basics*

- All behavior is a symptom of perception
- Every behavior makes sense to the behavior in the moment of behaving
- If you want to change behavior, you need to shift perceptions
- It is not about controlling others, but positioning others to control themselves and to flourish
- All people can find their own best way, provided they have access to needed information and obstacles are removed.
- We too easily over-focus on behavior and under-focus on perception
- You can read behavior backwards to identify the perceptions that caused it
- All learning is perceptual differentiation
- Learning requires engagement (e.g., cognitive, emotional, relational), not experience

1. All behavior is a symptom of perception

To a certain extent, this statement captures perceptual theory in a nutshell. All human behavior is rooted in the beliefs (both articulated and unarticulated) held by the individual. As we will note in a moment, this means that a discerning observer can discern beliefs from behavior.

2. Every behavior makes sense to the behavior in the moment of behaving

This is another easily-overlooked element in human behavior. People do very strange things, and we can ascribe many things to others on the basis of their actions. However, in the moment of action, the chosen behavior seemed like the most appropriate response, based on their in-the-moment perceptions. As noted earlier, it is not uncommon for someone to realize the error of their ways (or the stupidity of their decisions) moments later. But at the time, their actions made sense to them.

3. If you want to change behavior, you need to shift perceptions

To a large extent, this is the most important element of the theory, provided appropriate checks and balances are in play. When others are consistently acting in unacceptable or inappropriate ways, the theory explains how a change in behavior can take place. The key is not to focus on the behavior itself, but to address the underlying perceptions. A change in perception will often be followed by a change in behavior. Such changes are often permanent, because the individual no longer sees the world in the same way.

4. It is not about controlling others, but positioning others to control themselves and to flourish

In the context of the previous point, this is a key caveat. It is certainly possible to abuse the insights of perceptual theory, controlling the perceptions of others so that you can also exert control over their behavior. In addition to being immoral and unethical, this also directly contradicts the heart of Combs's work. Drawing on similar foundations as Combs's colleagues and contemporary, Abraham Maslow (1954), the entire theory is rooted in a vision for self-actualization, for providing a context for optimal human development and flourishing. This is likely why the helping professions have often been drawn to Combs's work. It is imminently respectful of human capacity

and potential. It creates the conditions for people to take control of their own lives, and to flourish and thrive.

5. All people can find their own best way, provided they have access to needed information and obstacles are removed

Combs's theory is very optimistic when it comes to human behavior and the capacity for growth and development. Humans are truly capable of amazing things. However, Combs's theory is also very realistic. Part of the reason the helping professions were drawn to his theory is that it provides a theoretical foundation that is **both** optimistic and realistic. Human experience can be very messy and complicated. And many individuals live in conditions that significantly limit and impede their growth and development. The theory reminds us that people are capable of finding their own best way. But they can only do so when they are able to access the information they need, and when the things that limited and impede are removed. This is, of course, a challenging process.

6. We too easily over-focus on behavior and under-focus on perception

This element is one of the key insights that drew me to the theory. In my experience as an educator, I and many other teachers, often over-focused on student behavior (e.g., misbehavior) and did not sufficiently recognize or attend to the underlying perceptions. And yet when I shifted my classroom management processes to see past the behavior and to respectfully seek to discern the perceptions that caused it, I saw incredible, even transformational results. In some cases, my students told me that previous teachers only "saw" the misbehavior, not the human being with a formative underlying story. I have since come to realize that this insight transfers far beyond education. This happens all the time: someone acts in a way that makes us uncomfortable, and we respond to their behavior. In some cases, we don't spare a thought on the fact that there is likely a reason they are acting the way they do. Combs's theory reminds us that this omission is potentially transformational.

7. You can read behavior backwards to identify the perceptions that caused it

This has already been explored at length earlier in this essay. But it is also an important insight for introducing perceptual theory. With time, reflection, and experience, we can train ourselves (or be trained by others) to read behavior backwards in order to identify the causal perceptions. This is not as easy as it sounds. It is not uncommon for people to immediately assume they know why someone is doing what they are doing. Reading behavior backwards is only truly effective, however, when our inferential work is rooted in careful attention and empathy. We need to discern how the individual looks at the world. It is not enough for us to determine how we would look at the world if we were in their shoes.

8. All learning is perceptual differentiation

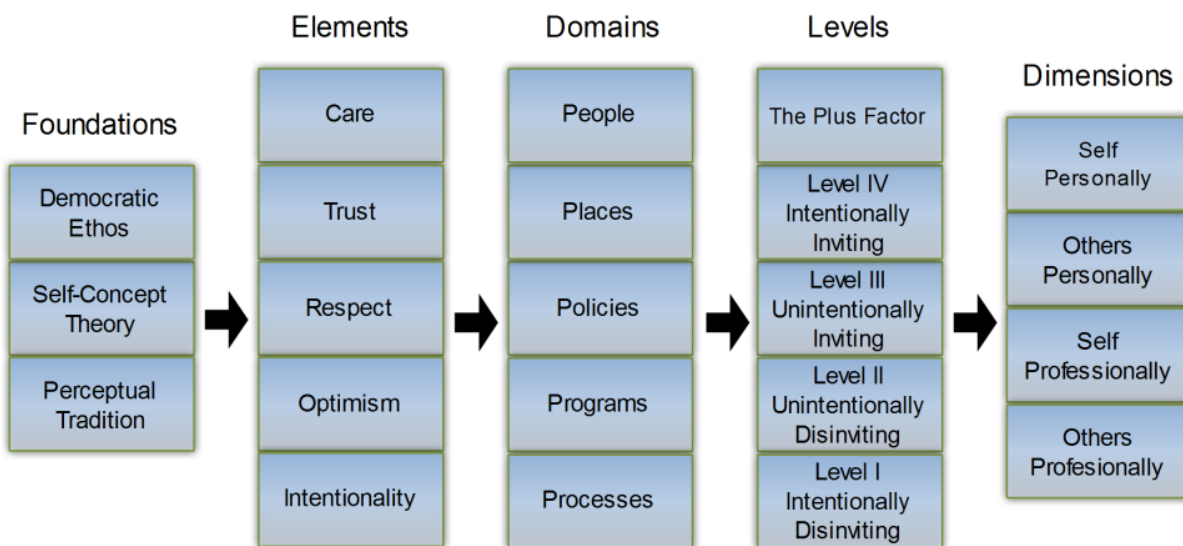
Combs's work is richly rooted in the science of perception. Cognitive research reminds us that human beings are constantly exposed to raw sensation (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc.). Martinez (2010) describes the incredible array of sense data as "sensory storm" (p. 61), and the system by which our brain receives and interprets sensory input as the "sensorium" (p. 61). Our brains process the overwhelming amount of sense detail by rapidly moving from initial sensation to selective perception and attention, filtering through the sense data in order to determine what

needs to be retained and remembered. This has enormous ramifications for teaching and learning in all contexts, including in education. We learn by differentiating some perceptions from other possible perceptions. This process of growth and development, rooted in perceptual differentiation, is how we learn.

9. Learning requires engagement, not experience (cognitive, emotional, relational)

Because learning is the result of perceptual differentiation, it requires engagement, not just experience. As students of Dewey have learned, we don't learn from *experience*. We learn from *reflecting on experience*. We are constantly surrounded by sensation, and our brains need to narrow our focus in order to attend on relevant and meaningful sense data. It is not enough to simply experience our sensations. We need to attend to and engage with our experience. As Combs (Combs Richards, & Richards, 1976) notes, "Out of all the things we *might* perceive, we perceive what is meaningful to us and what helps us to maintain the organization of our phenomenal self and thereby to satisfy our fundamental need" (p. 65).

Figure 2: *Invitational Theory* (Purkey & Novak, 2015, p.1)



D. Implications and Applications

The purpose of this essay is based on the author's perception that Combs's Perceptual Theory, has been overlooked and undervalued. The desired outcome is to re-introduce practitioners of Invitational Education theory to Combs's work because it is one of the three theoretical foundations that underpin Invitational Education theory. Given this, the IE community should recognize and draw upon the insights of the perceptual tradition. At the heart of Combs's vision was a vision for individual self-actualization and flourishing. As noted, this vision played a foundational role in the development of Invitational Education theory, which focuses upon both individual and community flourishing whereby others are intentionally invited to flourish and promote the flourishing of others. Focusing upon the inviter's and invitee's perceptions play a fundamental role in advancing the invitational paradigm (see Figure 2 above).

1. Perceptual Theory Provides a Theoretical Basis for Understanding Others

Combs's work provides a solid theoretical basis for understanding others, which is one of the most invitational, respectful, and hospitable things one person can do for another. The theory has been effectively applied in a host of helping fields and relationships, including teacher and students, social workers, therapists, nurses, caregivers and their clients, and supervisors, leaders, and administrators and their colleagues. When the helper truly seeks and supports the wellbeing and flourishing of the helpee, lives are often fundamentally changed. When an entire community is characterized by its invitational ethos, true transformation can occur.

2. Perceptual Theory Matters to the Invitational Community Because it is Part of Our Foundations

Along with *self-concept theory* and a *democratic ethos*, Perceptual Theory should matter to the invitational community given it is part of IE's Theoretical foundations (see Figure 2). As such, it forms the heart of Invitational Education theory. Recognizing the profound relationship between perceptions and behavior can position practitioners of IE theory to foster an inviting community that supports the self-actualization and flourishing of all community members. An inviting stance is rooted in perceptions that support flourishing, but also commits to attending and responding to the perceptions of others.

3. Perceptual Theory and the Five Elements of an Inviting Stance

As noted in Figure 2, Purkey and Novak (2015) identified five interdependent elements of an inviting stance, *Intentionality, Care, Optimism, Respect, Trust* (ICORT). Each ICORT element has significant potential for shaping an invitational mindset. Each of these elements is distinctively perceptual. The inviter and the invited need to perceive and respond to each interdependent element in order for them to truly be experienced and impactful.

4. Perceptual Theory and the Five Domains of an Inviting Community

Invitational theory focuses on five specific domains that contribute to the success or failure of all members of a community or organization (see Figure 2). Often described as "The Five Ps" (Purkey & Novak, 2015), *people, places, policies, programs, and processes*, these five domains collectively serve as a n institutional area for assessing and developing and supporting the flourishing of community members. Once again, perceptual theory can play a valuable role in determining how individuals perceive and respond to each domain of IE theory. Indeed, the intentional application of perceptual theory may actually position observers to see past the surface of behavior to the fundamental perceptions of community stakeholders.

5. Perceptual Theory and the Four Levels of Functioning

The continuum of the levels of functioning (Purkey & Novak, 2015), from *intentionally disinventing, unintentionally disinventing, unintentionally inviting, and intentionally inviting* (see Figure 2) rests heavily on recognizing the distinct impact of the perceptions of the inviter and invited. Indeed, a focus on reading behavior backwards to the underlying perceptions of key stakeholders may yield incisive and difference-making insights. This may provide needed resources and data that can allow practitioners to advance to higher levels of functioning, increasing the inviting experience for others.

The levels of functioning culminate with what Purkey and Novak (2015) describe as "*The Plus Factor*" (p. 1). The theorists write:

Invitational Theory, at its best, works like magic. Those who function at the highest levels of inviting become so fluent over time that the carefully honed skills and techniques they employ, are invisible to the untrained eye. They function with such talented assurance that the tremendous effort involved does not call attention to itself. (p. 6)

In many ways, the Plus Factor describes an aspiration that requires fully enacting perceptual theory, where truly focusing on the perceptions, self-actualization, and flourishing of others is simply part of the community experience—as natural as the air we breathe. In such a context, “*The Plus Factor*” can appear to happen effortlessly and naturally.

6. Perceptual Theory and the Four Dimensions

As noted in Figure 2, Purkey and Novak (2015) identified four dimensions of human functioning:

- being personally inviting to self,
- being personally inviting to others,
- being professionally inviting to self, and
- being professionally inviting with others

Here, too, perceptual theory, with its focus on both perception and behavior, plays a significant role in allowing an individual to flourish in each dimension, forcing them to build from the roots of perception to the behaviors that result.

7. The Perceptions of the Inviter and the Invited

A key strength of perceptual theory is that it requires leaders and community members to be able to look past behavior and focus on underlying perceptions. This intentionality and authenticity matters a great deal. As we have seen, a change in perception is often accompanied by a change in behavior. Whether an invitation is extended or received is completely perceptual. It starts with the perceptions and intentions of the inviter, which then leads to an inviting action or behavior. This is then received as a perception or experience by the invited, which, depending on how the invitation is perceived, may then impact subsequent behavior.

This has significant implications for IE leaders seeking to improve institutional climate and optimize success. Intentional invitations and actions are necessary, but not sufficient. It is imperative that IE leaders also pay close attention to how community member perceive invitations and what behavior result.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, Perceptual Theory has been overlooked. Certainly, not enough people are aware of the theory and its significant implications for understanding human behavior. As a foundational basis for Invitational Educational (IE) theory, IE advocates need to recognize and draw upon this theoretical foundation that so richly resonates and informs IE theory. Combs’s approach to understanding individual human behavior and his theory’s insights into human relationships and interactions that can profoundly inform our own perceptions and behaviors. Through my own leadership work and observations of others, this writer has been significantly shaped by the growing awareness of the nature and power of perceptual theory. In reflecting upon the legacy of Art Combs, Richards observed:

Consistently, the ideas he shared helped others grasp important perspectives for better understanding persons, being more effective professionals, and developing fulfilling human relationships. He often reminded us of things we already knew to be the case – but had somehow overlooked or set aside, to our detriment. (Combs & Richards, 2010, ix)

A participant in Magnuson's (2012) study provided an apt conclusion: "And, you know what? Art's whispering in my ear. 'Know this. People act in the ways that seem to make the most sense to them at that time'" (p. 47). As a result of this essay, may you also hear Art whispering in your ear!

References

- Allen, J.G., Wasiesko, M.M., & Chirichello, M. (2014). The missing link: Teaching the dispositions to lead. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 9(1), 135-147.
- Boeree, C. G. (1998). *Personality theories: Donald Snygg and Arthur W. Combs*.
<http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/snygg&combs.html>
- Combs, A.W. (1999). *Being and becoming: A field approach to psychology*. Springer.
- Combs, A.W., Avila, D.L., & Purkey, W.W. (1971). *Helping relationships: Basic concepts for the helping professions*. Allyn & Bacon.
- Combs, A.W., Soper, D.W., Gooding, C.T., Benton, J.A., Jr., Dickman, J.F., & Usher, R.H. (1969). *Florida studies in the helping professions: Social Science Monograph No. 37*. University of Florida Press.
- Combs, A.W. & Gonzalez, D.M. (1994). *Helping relationships: Basic concepts for the helping professions* (4th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.
- Combs, A. W. & Richards, A.C. (2006). *In Search of fulfillment: The quest of psychologist/educator Arthur W. Combs – An autobiography*. Free Person Press
- Combs A.W., & Richards, A.C. (Ed.). (2010). *Matters of consequence: Selected writings of Arthur W. Combs, Ph.D.* Field Psych Trust.
- Combs, A.W., Richards, A.C., & Richards, F. (1976). *Perceptual psychology: A humanistic approach to the study of persons*. Harper & Row
- Combs, A.W., Richards, A.C., & Richards, F. (1988). *Perceptual psychology: A humanistic approach to the study of persons*. University Press of America.
- Combs, A.W., & Snygg, D. (1959). *Individual behavior: A perceptual approach to behavior* (Revised edition). Harper & Row.

- Combs, A.W., & Soper, D.W. (1963). Perceptual organization of effective counselors. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 10(3), 222-226.
- Magnuson, S. (2012). Arthur Wright Combs: A humanistic pioneer. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 51, 33-50.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. Harpers.
- Martinez, M. E. (2010). *Learning and cognition: The design of the mind*. Merrill.
- Purkey, W.W. (1978). *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching and learning*. Wadsworth.
- Purkey, W.W. (1992). An introduction to invitational theory. *Journal of Invitational theory and Practice* 1(1), 5-15.
- Purkey, W.W., & Novak, J.M. (2015). *An introduction to invitational theory*.
https://www.invitationaleducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/art_intro_to_invitational_theory-1.pdf
- Purkey, W.W., Novak, J.M., & Fretz, J.R. (2020). *Developing inviting schools: A beneficial framework for teaching*. Teachers College Press.
- Richards, A.C. (2021). *Connecting the dots: Rethinking understandings of mediator effectiveness*. Dancing Crows Press.
- Richards, A. C., & Gonzalez, D. M. (2000). Arthur Wright Combs (1912–1999). *American Psychologist*, 55, 1150.
- Siu-Runyon, Y. (2000). The teacher is what matters, not silver bullet and magic formulas: An interview with Arthur W. Combs. *The Colorado Communicator*, 24, 6–17.
- Snygg, D. (1941). The need for a phenomenological System of Psychology. *Psychological Review*, 48(5), 404-424.
- Snygg, D., & Combs, A.W. (1949). *Individual behavior: A new frame of reference for psychology*. Harper & Brothers.
- Wasicsko, M.M. (2005). The fourth factor for hiring. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(24), p. C2.
- Wasicsko, M.M. (2007). The perceptual approach to teacher dispositions: The effective teacher as an effective person. In M.E. Diez & J. Rath (Eds.), *Dispositions in teacher education* (pp. 53-89). Information Age Publishing.
- Wasicsko, M.M., Wirtz, P., & Resor, C. (2009). Using dispositions in the teacher admission process. *SRATE Journal*, 18(2), 19-26.

To contact the author:

Sean-Jason Schat, Ph.D

sschat7@gmail.com