Particulars, Universals, and Invitations: A Reprise*

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What is inviting? More specifically, can some behaviors be defined universally as invitations regardless of how individuals perceive them? In this article, the existence of universal invitations and their relationship to perceptual processes are presented in an expanded view of how invitational levels of functioning are determined.

The invitational model, developed by William Purkey and others (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987, 1990), presents a structure by which we can define human interactions as either inviting or disinviting to our personal and professional development. The model suggests four levels of functioning: (1) Intentionally Disinviting, (2) Unintentionally Disinviting, (3) Unintentionally Inviting, and (4) Intentionally Inviting. A fundamental assumption of the model is that individual perception defines human interactions as either inviting or disinviting. Accordingly, the determination of whether a given communication invites or disinvites lies, as with beauty, in the "eyes of the beholder." Attributing this much power to the receiver's perceptual frame of reference creates a dilemma for the sender, particularly when, in spite of positive intentions, a message precipitates negative reactions and outcomes. In such instances, reaching agreement about the nature of invitations and disinvitations is not a simple matter.

Sometimes, seemingly beneficial messages are not accepted because they are perceived by the receiver in less favorable light than they are by the sender who created them. The four levels of professional and personal functioning in the invitational model place these well-intended yet rejected communications in the realm of "unintentional disinvitations" (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987). This level of functioning identifies interactions that "are typically well meaning, but . . . often seen by others as . . . simply thoughtless" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 18). The key phrase in this definition is "seen by others." Human perception is a powerful foundation of the inviting process and an essential ingredient in defining the levels of invitational functioning. Accepting it as the single ingredient for defining and describing human interactions, however, may be unwisely restrictive because it eliminates consideration of universal invitations.

* This article expands on ideas that first appeared in the Invitational Education Newsletter (1984).

Universal Invitations

Placing too much emphasis on individual perception when defining human interactions allows little possibility for the existence of universal invitations. Such a position rejects the potential of some behaviors to be, by their very nature, ultimately beneficial to the receiver, regardless of how they are perceived at a particular time and place. The underlying question in this paradox is whether or not by definition there is inherent good in all invitations. Just as Mortimer Adler (1981) contended "that some value judgments belong to the sphere of truth" (p. 71), it seems that some interactions are inherently beneficial to human development and learning processes, regardless of how they are defined by a particular person.

An example of this paradox is the occasion when a teacher challenges a student to accept more difficult assignments with the hope of achieving increased learning. The teacher, with an eye toward safeguarding the student's self-esteem, chooses reasonable and attainable goals and creates an atmosphere to encourage a higher level of student performance. The student on the other hand greets this invitation through a perceptual channel of fears, self-doubts, and other trepidations. As a result, the student evaluates the teacher's challenge to excel as disinviting, an invitation to fail. Does the student's initial rejection of this well-intended message negate its inherent beneficial good? If the teacher persists, does the perceived disinvitation become more intentional, more disinviting? These are not uncommon questions for teachers who challenge and inspire diverse student populations. Such teachers search for ways to accommodate the student's perceptions, while at the same time they encourage efforts towards higher goals.

Another example is when a spouse arrives home from work on a Friday night, ready to celebrate the weekend by inviting a few friends over for a party. In contrast, the marriage partner lies on the couch dreaming of a peaceful evening together at home. Conflict between these two perceptions is inevitable, and the answer about which one is inviting or disinviting is at best uncertain.

How does either of the examples above fit the levels of invitational functioning? Who is inviting? Who is disinviting? Perhaps these questions cannot be answered because of the limited information we have at hand. More specific information about particular perceptions and situations is needed. In addition, universal beliefs should be considered.

Are there particulars for each situation and universal truths about all human communications that help us define the limitless messages we send and receive? By contemplating this question, we may find a partial answer to the puzzle of how to define invitations and disinvitations. In doing so, we first must make a distinction between universals and particulars. Universals and Particulars

Universals and Particulars

Bertrand Russell's (1971) view of universals and particulars can assist us in understanding the role of perception in defining invitations and disinvitations. According to Russell, "If there is a distinction between particulars and universals, percepts will be among the particulars, while concepts will be among universals" (1971, p. 1). Translated into the language of invitational theory and practice, this means that, while certain behaviors can be defined conceptually and universally as inviting or disinviting, it is the particulars of all behaviors (i.e., the perceptions of senders and receivers) that gives them temporal meaning.

The relationship between universals and particulars, when applied to the invitational model, is best explained in terms of these spatial and temporal conditions. Some behaviors, though well meaning, are so negatively perceived in light of particular factors that they are easily understood and accepted as disinvitations. On the other hand, when viewed beyond the scope of time and space by expert observers and judges of human growth and development, these same behaviors might be defined universally as inviting actions. For example, a parent restraining a toddler from going into a busy street is judged as performing a beneficial action to prevent injury. Yet, the child protests and continues toward the street.

Particulars relate to entities, such as perceptions, that retain temporal and spatial qualities. As such, it is the particulars of an event that give it meaning in its present time and space. Returning to our example above, the toddler struggles and cries in response to the parent's action. The child wants to explore and discover new worlds and, taken in isolation, this perception and behavior are accepted as invitations to one's own self on the part of the child. At the same time, we would agree that the parent's actions are necessary in protecting the child from serious harm. The parent has the perceptual wisdom to know that the child's eagerness to explore will end in tragedy unless appropriate supervision and restraint are provided. This wisdom, however, does not diminish the struggle between two apparently inviting yet conflicting views.

In this way, it is the particulars, the temporal and spatial qualities, that distort whatever universality may exist for a given behavior. The child continues to be upset with the parent's refusal to permit freedom of exploration, while the parent becomes annoyed with the child's persistent insubordination. Each perceives the other's actions as being disinviting. Once again we see that our reliance on limited perceptions does not always help to determine whose interpretations are correct; whose behaviors are truly inviting.

Perceptual understanding alone does not help us define behaviors according to the four levels of professional and personal functioning. Other elements are needed in this quest, and according to the invitational model, these elements are summarized as an "inviting stance" (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987). The characteristics of an inviting stance optimism, trust, respect, and intentionality are key particulars that contribute to the universality of invitations.

Elements of Universal Invitations

The characteristics of an inviting stance denote a positive direction and beneficial purpose in all behaviors. Such direction and purpose often exist beyond the scope and understanding of the participants in a given interaction. Most human interactions that are optimistic, trustful, respectful, and intentional approach the possibility of being universally inviting, regardless of the initial perceptions of the people involved. On the other hand, actions that lack a helpful direction and caring purpose, or worse yet consist of uncaring and harmful conditions, approach the lethal level of being universally disinviting. Simply saying that something is inviting does not make it so, unless the ingredients of optimism, trust, respect, and intentionality exist. Of these ingredients, intentionality is the framework, the internal schema, that cultivates and orchestrates the development of other beneficial qualities. A person becomes an optimistic, caring, trustful and respectful individual through purposeful behaviors that lead to being a positive presence in one's own life and the lives of others.

Intentionality has been thoroughly described as an important existential quality by Rollo May (1969) and others. Its attributes include purposeful planning, which incorporates proper timing of events and understanding of spatial relationships, and an ability to synthesize feedback into a selection of reasonable and responsible alternatives. In addition, the root meaning, "to tend," implies a positive purpose and caring toward self and others. As examples, a parent tends to a sick child, a farmer tends to the field, and teacher tends to the class.

The quality of caring, inherent in the concept of positive intentionality, is another element of universality. Caring is a condition of human interaction that appears similar to what Mortimer Adler referred to as "the ultimate and common good" (1981, p. 92). A teacher's gentle persistence in encouraging a beginning reader to explore new words, or a speech coach's nudging of a hesitant orator to face an uncertain audience, exemplifies this quality of caring. While such persistence and prodding encourage risk, they also cultivate realistic optimism, unwavering trust, mutual respect, and positive direction.

To be well-intended and caring are admirable qualities, but without positive action the best of intentions will fall short of their goals. Through positive actions

we demonstrate our best intentions and ensure the welfare of ourselves and others. By combining the elements of optimism, trust and respect with a positive direction, our interactions have the potential to approach the realm of universal invitations. This potential is realized when we consistently behave in intentionally inviting ways towards ourselves and others. To achieve the goal of becoming intentionally inviting, we accurately evaluate the particulars, the percepts if you will, of our messages and actions.

The Role of Perception

The opinions presented here do not diminish the importance of perception in understanding the dynamics of human interactions or in defining the beneficial messages we create and send in our personal and professional relationships. Rather, they convey the belief that the quality of human interactions cannot always be evaluated from a single perspective that of a sender or receiver. Invitations and disinvitations are not consistently and correctly defined by relying solely on the perceptual judgment of one person. In most human interactions, the perceptions of all participants as well as the universal elements inherent in a inviting stance contribute to this discrimination process.

This view is congruent with Purkey and Novak's focus on teacher and student perceptions within school relationships (Purkey & Novak, 1984). They emphasized the interaction of perceptions in establishing an invitational stance and practice. Because every action is open to infinite perceptions and corresponding interpretations, it follows that the process of defining a given behavior according to the hierarchical levels of professional and personal functioning is not always a simple task. There are times when a communication is rejected by the recipient even though it has all the universal elements of an invitation. The fact that it has not been accepted does not make the action any less inviting. Perhaps it is simply not the right time or place. Purkey and Novak said it best: "By not accepting, some [people] ... are seeing if we are really sincere, or are seeking time to think things over" (1984, p. 49).

Practitioners of the invitational model are reminded that defining levels and types of professional and personal functions is a complex matter. It is dangerous to oversimplify the process. The consistent exploration and consideration of additional elements for inclusion into the practice of defining levels of functioning is, therefore, strongly encouraged. Successful application of the inviting process offers some assurance that accurate assessments and clear definitions of interactions are achievable.

The Inviting Process

The invitational model has been described as a process of creating, sending, negotiating and evaluating messages (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987; Schmidt, 1990). The stages of this inviting process provide a useful structure by which we examine universals and consider particulars to accurately define and describe the messages we send to ourselves and others. Purkey and Schmidt (1987) have labeled three major stages of the process as: The Preparation Stage, the Initiating and Responding Stage, and the Follow-up Stage. By learning the aspects of each stage we increase our understanding of the particulars, the temporal and spatial aspects, of all our interactions.

The Preparation Stage

The first stage of creating and sending beneficial messages is marked by a desire to create positive messages and a willingness to understand the perceptions of the receiver. Good things do not happen unless someone wants them to occur and carefully plans for their success.

Having the desire. Many factors influence our willingness to behave in beneficial ways towards ourselves and others. These factors enter our perceptual worlds and are assessed by an internal guidance system, sometimes referred to as the self-concept. At the beginning of every interaction we are guided by particular perceptions of past events, which increase or decrease our desire to send and accept messages in given situations.

Expecting good things. When we choose to send or accept an inviting message, we believe that positive results will occur. Without this belief we will neither send nor accept invitations. In much the same way, a student who fears failure will reject the genuine overtures of a challenging teacher. Again, these expectations are the product of countless perceptions about ourselves and others accumulated over a lifetime.

Preparing the setting. Having an appropriate level of desire and expecting good results will lead to successful interactions if we prepare properly. For example, when a spouse comes home expecting to party the night away, a phone call to forewarn the partner may be in order. Preparation is influenced by our perceptions, but it is also guided by universals, such as accepted courtesies and beliefs in human dignity and value. In preparing our messages, we balance the particulars of our own perceptions with the universal beliefs we hold to be true.

Reading the situation. To prepare a successful invitation we must be able to read the situation the needs of others and ourselves accurately. Taking time to learn about the perceptions of others assures the beneficial intent of the messages we create and send. As with the earlier steps, reading situations accurately

includes temporal and spatial particulars as well as widely held universal truths. When we are successful at reading situations accurately, we avoid the posture of phenomenal absolutism, which conveys the belief that others must see the world the way we do, and if they do not, they are wrong or they lie.

The Initiating/Responding Stage

To be considered, an invitation must first be created. Then it must be delivered, and finally, it must be received. Without initiation and response, an invitation is simply a pleasant thought. A first step in assuring a positive response to our messages is to create invitations with genuine regard and care for ourselves and others.

Choosing caringly. A beneficial message is always chosen and sent with the highest regard for the receiver. While perceptions and other particulars play an important role in defining these beneficial messages, genuine caring, as defined by Milton Mayeroff (On Caring, 1971), approaches the realm of universal truth. This level of caring puts the person in the forefront of the process and above all other considerations, such as time and space.

Acting appropriately. Involvement in beneficial relationships requires responsible actions from all participants. By acting appropriately and responsibly, we demonstrate universal beliefs that supersede scheduling constraints, funding limitations, and other temporal or spatial particulars, which may otherwise impede our efforts to create and send invitations. At the same time, we are aware that particular restraints and conditions will define the parameters of our responsibilities.

Honoring the net. A related step is to respect the privacy of the person in the relationship. Invitational theory assumes that there is an inviolable boundary to be respected in all human relationships. By honoring "the net," we respect the autonomy and uniqueness of those with whom we relate. Again, this belief may be accepted as a universal truth, but in practice the particulars of the situation will influence the relationship. For example, a despondent person who contemplates suicide should not be ignored or left alone. Privacy and confidentiality cannot be honored in this circumstance.

Ensuring reception. A message sent but not received cannot be acted upon. When initiating invitations, we must assure their reception for a response to be possible. In this step, temporal and spatial conditions are important factors to consider, because they sometimes interfere with the reception of our messages.

As senders, we assume responsibility for following up our messages to be sure they are received and understood in the way we intend them.

The Follow-up Stage

When our messages are received, we take action to assure that they are accepted and acted upon. The steps we take in this phase of the inviting process will lead to a successful outcome of the interaction and a promise of future relationships. The first step is to interpret the immediate responses to our messages.

Interpreting responses. The messages and invitations we extend to others are usually thoughtfully considered by receivers before they respond. During this period of consideration receivers review and weigh many factors. At the same time, we, the senders, analyze the reception of our messages to interpret responses accurately. Was the intended message received? Was the message understood as it was intended? If a message was not accepted, was the entire message rejected or was part of it considered? All these questions relate to particulars that can be negotiated and altered to make our intended messages more palatable to all participants.

Negotiating. When an invitation is not accepted because of temporal, spatial, or perceptual differences, we attempt to negotiate a resolution of these barriers so that the relationship will continue. Again, it is the particulars that are negotiated. Depending on the nature of the relationship, universal beliefs may be introduced, learned, and embraced by all participants. In the case of the parent restraining a toddler from entering a busy street, we might expect that the child would be picked up and moved to an area where exploration and discovery can proceed more freely and safely. In this way, the parent attends to the particular threat of a dangerous situation while respecting the child's desire to explore and learn.

Evaluating outcomes. In every human interaction we evaluate the outcomes. Friends assess our companionship, teachers grade students, audiences applaud performances, and so forth. All of life's events are assigned a positive or negative value by someone, in some fashion. From this evaluation process we are able to improve the quality and quantity of our invitations and develop deeper more trustful relationships.

Developing trust. As more invitations are accepted and responded to successfully, the cycle of human relationships continues. One successful invitation leads to another, and as this cycle continues and expands, trusting relationships are established. We see this repeated time and time again in countless interactions between parents and children, teachers and students, husbands and wives, and employees and employers. As with the other steps and stages of this learning process, the development of trust encompasses a variety of

particulars, related to temporal and spatial perceptions, that are evaluated within the context of widely held universal beliefs. In this way, trustful relationships are defined by a complex process of evaluating particulars, accepting universal beliefs, and understanding levels of personal and professional functioning.

Defining the Levels of Functioning

In theory, the invitational model contends that the receivers of intended and unintended messages evaluate the benefits of these communications through individualized perceptual processes. In this article, I present the possibility of a broader context for defining and describing the four levels of functioning proposed by the model. This context suggests that particulars, those temporal and spatial perceptions of an individual, be considered along with pertinent universal beliefs which hold that some interactions are beneficial for all persons in all circumstances.

The inviting process suggests that both universals and particulars have an important role in creating, sending, and evaluating successful messages. For this reason, we are encouraged to look beyond our perceptions, and beyond the perceptions of the people we intend to help, to answer the question, "What is inviting?" Human perception is an essential factor, a necessary ingredient, but it is not sufficient in fully understanding and successfully applying the invitational model.

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