An Introduction to Self-Concept Theory: How self-perception shapes behavior

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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 on the second of these foundations, *Self-Concept Theory*. Self-Concept Theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the nature and impact of each individual's most fundamental perception, the perception of self, or their self-concept.

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. All human behavior is fundamentally shaped by how the individual perceives themselves. The author begins by providing an overview of self-concept theory, exploring some of the central tenets and implications. The author then reviews the history of the development of the theory, followed by a summary of some of the theory's foundational elements. The essay concludes with an exploration of several potential implications and applications for the Invitational community.

Key Words: *Invitational Theory, Invitational Education, Self-Concept, Self-Concept Theory, Perceptual Theory, Self-Concept-As-Learner*

Introduction

One of the key lessons I learned as a teacher and educational leader is that you can't force someone to change their behavior, even if it may sometimes seem that you are able to do so. You can gain compliance through the (mis)use of your power, of course. But that is not the same thing. What I discovered, however, is that you can exert a powerful positive influence on others (and on their perceptions and behavior) through your own words and actions. When I saw students struggling with inappropriate behavior, I recognized that if I could impact the way they looked at the situation, they would often change their own behavior in wise and appropriate ways. This is what people working in the helping professions seek to do: to help people change the way they look at things, knowing that a change in perception is likely to result in a change in behavior. The most important perception that an individual often needs to change is the way they look at themselves. The fundamental perception that impacts human behavior is self-perception. How an individual perceives others is also quite significant, of course. But self-perception comes first.

Perceiving *self-as-able* and *self-as-important* is very different than perceiving *self-as-unable* and *self-as-insignificant*.

In a previous publication, (2022), I re-introduced perceptual theory to the invitational theory community, identifying it as one of the three foundational theories that contributed to the development of the inviting tradition. Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) remind us that invitational theory is firmly established on three foundations, *perceptual theory*, *self-concept theory*, and the *democratic ethos*. Through the 2022 article I highlighted the importance of understanding and applying the insights of perceptual theory to authentically and effectively enact invitational practices. In the article at hand, the focus will be on the second of the three foundational theories, *self-concept theory*, which seeks to understand the nature and impact of self-perception. Understanding and acting on this foundational theory will better position members of the invitational tradition to successfully enact invitational theory. Understanding how an individual perceives themselves will allow those who seek to care for them to successfully communicate inviting messages, and to avoid being perceived as disinviting. It is also likely to position the people we work with to become more self- and other-aware as well.

What is Self-Concept Theory?

In an upcoming section I will review some of the history and origins of self-concept theory. For now, it is appropriate to begin with a brief introduction. Self-concept is a theoretical construct, a hypothetical tool intended to help us understand human behavior. In his seminal publication, renowned psychologist, Carl Rogers (1959) makes a strong case for the value and impact of constructs that have emerged in his field, noting that such constructs are pervasive and, "have application to a wide variety of human activities" (p. 246). Rogers identifies self-concept as one such construct. Rogers (1959) describes self-concept as a gestalt, "a configuration in which the alteration of one minor aspect could completely alter the whole pattern" (p. 201). Art Combs (Combs & Avila, 1985), a contemporary of Rogers, and the originator of perceptual theory, reminds us that the self-concept "is not a thing, but an organization of ideas. It is an abstraction, a gestalt, a peculiar pattern of perceptions of self" (p. 32). Self-concept is an abstract construct that provides important insights that can help us better understand why people act the way they do, and to thereby seek to provide conditions that could contribute to human flourishing.

Invitational theorists William Purkey and John Novak (1996) refer to self-concept as both a "moderator variable" (p. 31) and an "anchoring perception" (p. 31). Self-concept is a moderator variable because it clearly links different aspects of human identity, perception, and behavior. It is an anchoring perception because it serves as a defining foundation and touchstone for what people believe and do. As a result, a clearer understanding of self-concept will allow us to better understand others, and to support their wellbeing and flourishing.

Self-concept describes *the beliefs an individual holds about who they are, the foundational beliefs about self that guide and direct their behavior*. In seeking to understand another person, it is important to recognize that their self-concept IS their reality, and, as such, it exercises a shaping impact on their identity and behavior. As Purkey (1970) noted, "The world of the self may appear to the outsider to be subjective and hypothetical, but to the experiencing individual, it has the feeling of absolute reality" (p. 13). Perceptual theory reminds us that every behavior makes sense to the behaver in the moment of behaving. Their behavior is rooted in their perceptions of reality, and of their identity and place in the world. Everything an individual does is ultimately centered on maintaining, protecting, and enhancing their self-concept. If we want to understand others, those who work in the helping professions need to recognize and seek to understand the pivotal nature and profound impact of self-concept.

History and Origins

In this section I seek to describe the historical narrative of self-concept theory, linking it back to some of the key voices and contributions in the development and advancing of the theory. It is important to note that the construct continues to have staying power. All theories emerge in a context, and the history and origins of self-concept theory have played, and continue to play, an important role in invitational theory and practice. This section begins with key voices from the past, focuses on the humanist psychology tradition and the invitational tradition, then highlights a couple of recent emergences and extensions.

1. Key Voices from the Past

In an introduction to self-concept, Purkey (1988) traces self-concept's historical narrative back to Rene Descartes (1644) and Sigmund Freud (1900). Descartes, in *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) introduced a transformation in the history of philosophy when he powerfully demonstrated that existence depends on perception. Similarly, Freud's (1900/1962) study of the functioning of the human mind highlighted the importance of internal mental processing. Both figures played a

key role in the historical shift from a focus on the external and observable to an emphasis on the internal and perceptual.

2. The Humanist Psychology Tradition

Self-concept theory is clearly rooted in the humanist psychology tradition, with a direct link to the landmark work of Carl Rogers and Art Combs. However, the first reference to self-concept appears in an unpublished dissertation by Victor Raimy (1943). As Rogers (1959) notes,

> Raimy (1943) produced a careful and searching definition of the self-concept which was helpful in our thinking. There seemed to be no operational way of defining it at that point. Attitudes toward the self could be measured, however, and Raimy and several others began such research. (p. 201)

A focus on Self-Concept, however, arose in the writings of key figures in the humanist psychology movement. This tradition also serves as the foundation for the emergence of invitational theory.

Carl Rogers. Carl Rogers is a key voice in the field and tradition. A giant in the world of psychology, Rogers transformed the field by introducing a system of helping others built on the importance of the self and the significance of self-perception. As Purkey (1970) notes, "In Rogers theory, the self *is* the central aspect of personality" (p. 6). Rogers' focus on the self-arose from his work as a therapist, where the concept of a person's "real self" consistently emerged as a significant factor. Rogers (1959) states that "It seemed clear from such expressions that the self was an important element in the experience of the client, and that in some odd sense his goal was to become his 'real self'" (p. 201). Rogers' articulation of "the subjective world" underscores the centrality of the self-concept. Rogers (1959) observes that:

> It is my belief in the fundamental predominance of the subjective. Man lives essentially in his own personal and subjective world, and even his most objective functioning, in science, mathematics, and the like, is the result of subjective purpose and subjective choice. (p. 191)

Reflecting back on Rogers' impact on self-concept, Purkey and Schmidt (1990) point out that,

> In Rogers' view, self-concept is the central ingredient in human personality and personal adjustment. Rogers described the self-concept as a social product, developing out of interpersonal relationships and striving for stability and consistency. He maintained that there is a basic human need for positive regard both from oneself and from others. (p. 16)

Art Combs. Combs, a contemporary of Rogers, is the originator of perceptual theory. He is also one of the originators of the term "self-concept," recognizing it as the primary perception that shapes human behavior: the perception of self. Snygg and Combs (1959) note that "The self is the individual's basic frame of reference, the central core, around which the remainder of the perceptual field is organized" (p. 146). All subsequent perceptions and behaviors flow from this central core. Combs continued to explore the concept throughout his career, extending his definition:

> The self-concept includes all the aspects of the perceptual field to which we refer when we say "I" or "me." It is the organization of perceptions about self that seems to the individual to be who he or she is. It is composed of thousands of perceptions that very in clarity, precision, and importance in the person's peculiar economy. Taken together, this organization is called the self-concept. (Combs & Avila, 1985, p. 31)

One of Combs's landmark studies, *The Florida Key* (Combs et al., 1973), directly focuses on self-concept as learner, a fundamental dimension of self-concept that clearly has significant implications for education but is also essential for human growth and flourishing across the human lifespan, something we will return to later in this document. Combs and Avila (1985) observe "When we know how people see themselves, much of their behavior becomes clear to us, and often we can predict with great accuracy what they are likely to do next" (p. 34).

3. The Invitational Tradition – William Purkey and John Novak

The humanist tradition was also the breeding grounds for invitational theory. William Purkey and John Novak both studied under Art Combs, and they continued to advance the work of their predecessors in the humanist tradition. As noted, their development of invitational theory rests firmly on these foundations. As invitational theory advanced, the nature and impact of self-concept played a significant role. Purkey and Novak (1996) noted, "The maintenance, protection, and enhancement of the perceived self is the basic motive behind all human behavior" (p. 25). Novak, Armstrong, and Brown (2014) describe self-concept as the "core of a person's identity" (p. 25). Purkey and Schmidt (1990) provide a helpful definition, defining self-concept,

> as a learned, organized, and active system of subjective beliefs that an individual holds to be true regarding his or her own personal existence. It serves to guide behavior and enables everyone to assume particular roles in life. Rather than initiating activity, self-concept serves as a perceptual filter and guides the direction of behavior. (p. 15)

The self-concept exercises a profound impact on the enacting of invitational theory. Perceptions of *self-as-inviting* and *self-as-invited* are true difference-makers in the inviting process. Whether or not participants perceive themselves as inviting and invited profoundly shapes the behaviors they display.

4. Recent Manifestations and Extensions

Recent Social Science Initiatives. The nature and impact of self-concept continues to exercise a shaping role in helping professions. Recent initiatives have seen a direct focus on mental health, social-and-emotional learning, interpersonal relationships, connectedness and belonging, etc. As these traditions and approaches have developed, individual self-awareness and self-perception have emerged as central elements when it comes to the wellbeing and human flourishing of both individuals and their communities.

Self-Concept Clarity. Self-concept research has also continued to advance, particularly as psychology and other disciplines have recognized that the concept is significant, but also that it is multi-faceted and dynamic. *Self-Concept Clarity* (Campbell, 1990, Campbell et al., 1996, Lodi-Smith & DeMarree, 2017) has emerged as an important consideration, with application in many different spheres. This research emerged in response to the recognition that interpersonal issues often emerged because of a lack of self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990). Campbell and her colleagues (1996) define self-concept clarity as, "the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable" (p. 141).

Self-Concept Theory Basics

In this section I introduce some of the central elements of Self-Concept theory, providing a foundation for some of the key implications and applications the theory offers. Drawing on existing literature, this section explores the different aspects of the self, considers several self-concept fundamentals, identifies the three basic self-concept assumptions, then concludes with a reflection on self-concept development and change. In the following section the focus will shift to implications and applications.

Aspects of the Self

Global Self-Concept and Situational Self-Concept Sub-Systems. One of the things I have appreciated about self-concept is the powerful reminder that understanding how an individual perceives "self" is more complicated than one might expect. There is certainly a stability to the

self-concept, and this is a key dimension of the theory. But self-concept is also mediated by situations and contexts. For example, as a middle school classroom teacher, I had a couple of very similar interactions with different parents about the inappropriate classroom behavior of their adolescent children. In each case, the parents simply could not accept that their child had behaved in the way I described. As our conversation developed, it became clear that the classroom social dynamics, including their child's perceived status in the classroom culture and the presence of hormones and possible romantic interests in the room, caused their child to behave in the classroom in ways they would never have behaved in their own home. How the children perceived themselves was mostly stable, but it was also affected by context! I have seen this a similar dynamic play out in a wide variety of contexts and demographic groups—with adults as well as adolescents. Self-concept is multi-faceted and contextual. As Purkey and his colleagues (1983) note,

> Most self-concept researchers have tended to focus on global self-concepts rather than on situation-specific self-images, such as self as athlete, self as family member, self as learner, or self as friend. By observing only global self-concept—which is many-faceted and contains diverse, even conflicting sub- selves—investigators have underestimated the importance of those sub-systems. (p. 6)

Three Parts of Self-Concept. Rogers (1959) provides an important foundation, identifying the three fundamental aspects of an individual's self-concept: (1) *The Ideal Self* (the person one earnestly seeks to be when they are at their best), (2*) Self-Image* (how a person presently perceives themselves), and (3) *Self-Esteem* (how much a person likes, accepts, and values themselves).

Two Aspects of the Development of the Self. Lewis (1990) identifies two primary aspects of the development of self, the Existential Self and the Categorical Self. (1) The Existential Self refers to a person's recognition that they exist as a distinct and unique entity, different from the others around them. (2) The Categorical Self describes a person's growing understanding of self-as-object, as an individual with both concrete and distinguishable characteristics (e.g., age, gender, size, eye color, hair color, etc.), as well as unique and defining internal and abstract properties.

Two Key Aspects of Self-Identity. In a similar vein, within the Invitational Tradition, Purkey and Novak (1996) observe that self-identity has two key aspects, (1) Categories (e.g., demographic differences) and (2) Attributes (e.g., unique descriptive characteristics).

Each of these key voices remind us that self-concept is rooted in a wide variety of elements, both visible and invisible. It is imperative for those working in the helping professions to recognize

the complexity of self-concept when seeking to support the people they work with. As we will see, however, the theory does not simply help us recognize the complexity, but also provides way to address and respond to this complexity.

Self-Concept Fundamentals

Why Self-Concept Matters. Self-concept matters because it profoundly shapes perception (how one sees and what one sees) and behavior (what one does). If we want to understand and support others, we need to identify their self-concept. As Novak, Armstrong, and Brown (2014) observe, "If perceptions are people's psychological reality, their most intimate reality is their self-concept, the personal picture they maintain, protect, and enhance of who they are and how they fit into the world" (p. 25). Purkey (1970) notes that "people are constantly trying to behave in a manner which is consistent with the way they view themselves (p. 12). Rogers (1959) reminds us that "when a person's views of himself changes his behavior changes accordingly" (p. 189). Self-concept theory helps us appreciate that understanding self-concept can help us to understand others yet can also position us to support and influence their perceptions and behaviors.

How Self-Concept is Formed. Self-concept is not immutable and unchanging. It is teachable and adaptable. We are not born with a self-concept. The formation of a self-concept begins in the first 2-3 months of life and continues to develop across the human lifespan. Self-concept is formed by (1) a person's life experiences and (2) their interactions with others. Purkey and Novak (1996) suggest that the ingredients of self-concept are primarily social, including both verbal and nonverbal communication. This is one of the reasons self-concept is foundational to invitational theory. Purkey and his colleagues (1983) use the phrase, "signal systems" to describe this social element, noting that:

> During the early years of development, each child is surrounded by countless signal systems. "Inviting" or "disinviting" messages inform the child of his or her abilities, values, and autonomy, or the lack thereof. Every experience the child has and every interpretation he or she makes of that experience influences the development of the child's self-concept, positively or negatively. (p. 52)

Self-Concept as Guidance System. In their recent book on inviting schools, Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) describe self-concept as a guidance system, defining it as "a complex, continuously active system of subjective beliefs about personal experience. It guides behavior and enables each individual to assume particular roles in life" (p. 39). This is a helpful descriptor, as it

serves to remind us that a person's behavior is guided by their self-concept, once again highlighting how imperative it is for those in the helping professions to identify a person's self-concept, and to support them in developing a positive and healthy self-concept. Their future perception and behavior depend on it.

The Importance of Positive Self-Concept. Because a person's behavior is profoundly shaped by their self-concept, it is important that each person have a positive self-concept, one that is realistic about who they are and what they can achieve, but also optimistic about their capacity to be and act, and confident in their own agency and self-determinism. Combs and Avila (1985) observe that people who have a positive self-concept "are likely to behave with confidence, causing others to react in corroborative fashion. People who believe they *can,* are more likely to succeed. The very existence of such feelings about self creates conditions that are likely to make them so" (p. 35). Returning to Purkey, Novak, and Fretz's (2020) focus on invitational schools, the authors point out that:

> Without self-confidence, students easily succumb to apathy, dependency, and a loss of self-control. Too often, the real problem of negative self-esteem is hidden beneath such labels as *unmotivated, unteachable*, *undisciplined*, *unable*, or *uninterested*. The classroom result is that students with low self-regard will expect the worst in every situation and will be constantly afraid of saying the wrong word or doing the wrong thing. (p. 41)

Psychology literature is full of examples of the significant impact of negative self-perception and self-concept. The literature is also very clear about the nature and impact of positive perceptions of self.

Self-Concept and Self-Report. The self-concept literature is careful to distinguish the concept from similar terms, such as self-image, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-report. There is certainly an overlap between them. But the distinctiveness of self-concept is significant. Theorists have been particularly careful to distinguish between self-concept (a multi-faceted system of perceptions) and self-report (what a person is willing to or chooses to say about themselves). Self-concept is more accurate and reliable than self-report because it is based on observable data, and, as Combs notes (Combs & Avila, 1985), it can "be understood indirectly through a process of inference from some form of observed behavior" (p. 40). The authors (Combs & Avila, 1985) elaborate further, noting:

> The question may be legitimately raised as to why inferences about the self-concept, made from observed behavior, are more acceptable indicators of the self-concept than a person's self-report. First, the inferred self-concept is more accurate on theoretical grounds; it approaches the self-concept as an organization of *perceptions* that *produce* behavior rather than accepting the person's behavior as synonymous with self-perception. Second, it recognizes the existence of distorting factors in the self-report and attempts to eliminate as many of these as practicable. (p. 40)

Three Basic Assumptions

Invitational Theory literature typically introduces self-concept theory by identifying and exploring the three basic assumptions of self-concept: (1) the self-concept is *learned*, (2) the self-concept is *organized*, and (3) the self-concept is *dynamic*. William Purkey's publications (Purkey, 1988; Purkey & Schmidt, 1990) provide a helpful blend of explanation and elaboration for each of the assumptions, which I will include in detail below.

1. The Self-Concept is Learned. As noted earlier, we are not born with a self-concept. It emerges early in life, and it continues to develop throughout our lives, and it is formed by our life experiences and interactions with others. As a result, the self-concept is learned. However, as Purkey and Schmidt observe, "Fortunately, because self-concept is learned, it can be taught" (p. 18). Indeed, this is the grand hope of the self-concept vision: that self-concept, though stable and conservative in nature, is teachable and adaptable.

For each of these three assumptions, I will lean heavily on Purkey's articulation and exploration of implications and corollaries. Purkey and Schmidt (1990) note that the fact that self-concept is learned has a number of important implications:

- Because self-concept is a social product, developed through repeated experiences, it possesses relatively boundless potential for development and actualization.
- Individuals perceived different aspects of themselves at different times and with varying degrees of clarity.
- Any experience which is inconsistent with one's self-concept may be perceived as a threat, and the more of these experiences there are, the more rigid the self-concept becomes to maintain and protect itself.
- Individuals strive to behave in ways that are in keeping with their self-concepts, no matter how helpful or harmful to oneself or others.

- Self-concept usually takes precedence over the physical body. Individuals will often sacrifice physical comfort and safety for self-concept reasons.
- Self-concept continuously guards itself against loss of self-esteem, for it is this loss that produces feelings of anxiety and worthlessness. (p. 16)

2. The Self-Concept is Organized. A person's self-concept is remarkably stable and consistent. It must be, otherwise human identity would shift and change constantly. This stability can be problematic, of course, but it is also a hallmark of human identity. Purkey and Schmidt point out that "Each person maintains countless perceptions regarding one's personal existence, and each perception is orchestrated with all the others. It is generally stable and organized quality that gives consistency to the human personality" (p. 18).

Purkey and Schmidt (1990) note that the organized nature of the self-concept has a number of implications:

- Self-concept requires consistency, stability, and tends to resist change. In fact, if self-concept changed readily, the individual would lack a consistent and dependable personality.
- The more central a particular belief is to one's self-concept, the more resistant one is to changing the belief.
- At the heart of the self-concept is the self-as-doer, the "I," which is distinct from the self-as-object, the various "me's." This allows the person to reflect on past events, analyze present perceptions, and shape future experiences.
- Because basic perceptions of oneself are quite stable, change takes time. A vital attribute of any professional helper is patience.
- Perceived success and failure impact heavily on self-concept. Failure in a highly regarded area lowers evaluations in all other areas as well. Success in a prized area raises evaluation in other seemingly unrelated areas. (pp. 18-19)

3. The Self-Concept is Dynamic. While a person's self-concept is characterized by stability, it is also dynamic. The accumulation of formative life-experiences and interactions with meaningful others have contributed to the formation of everyone's self-concept, the self-concept also has the potential for further development and change.

Purkey (1988) identified a number of key implications of the dynamic nature of the self-concept:

- The world and the things in it are not just perceived; they are perceived in relation to one's self-concept.
- Self-concept development is a continuous process. In a healthy personality there is constant assimilation of new ideas and expulsion of old ideas throughout life.
- Individuals strive to behave in ways that are in keeping with their self-concepts, no matter how helpful or hurtful to oneself or others.
- Self-concept usually takes precedence over the physical body. Individuals will often sacrifice physical comfort and safety for emotional satisfaction.
- Self-concept continuously guards itself against loss of self-esteem, for it is this loss that produces feelings of anxiety.
- If self-concept must constantly defend itself from assault, growth opportunities are limited. (p. 3)

Developing and Changing the Self-Concept

As we have noted, the self-concept is both stable and dynamic. It has a degree of stability, but also has the potential for growth and change. Events and interactions serve to both reinforce the self-concept, but also provide opportunities for the individual to discern the need for growth and change. Herein lies the hope of helping professions: "because self-concept is learned, it can be taught" (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990, p. 18).

The Conservative Nature of Self-Concept. It is important to acknowledge that a person's self-concept is conservative, and resists change. This is part of its stability: our experiences have shaped us, and it is not easy for a person to change their perceptions. In many ways, this is a positive element of human identity: our self-concepts are not fickle and easily changeable. In order for one's self-concept to change, one's experiences or interactions must be deemed significant enough to warrant a change.

Self-Concept Development. Despite its conservative nature, however, the self-concept remains dynamic, even when this may not always appear to be the case! The self-concept is teachable, and change is possible. The self-concept is selective because it seeks to maintain and reinforce itself. If development and change is to occur, the individual must perceive the people and events around them as significant enough to consider a shift in perception and behavior. For family members and helpers, this is an important distinction. If they are positioned to be perceived as

important to the individual, their insights may have influence, particularly if their influence is supported and reinforced by others in the individual's life.

Implications and Applications

Influencing others is always a tricky thing. What if they don't want your influence? What if your influence might cause more harm than good? History contains many tragic examples of the harmful influence individuals can have on others, even when intentions are good.

The inviting tradition, however, has always maintained that it is possible to be a positive force in the lives of others, as long as one prioritizes both the individual's agency and wellbeing. In *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow provides a helpful distinction between being a force for psychopathology or psychotherapy in the lives of others. Maslow (1954) writes,

> Let people realize that every time they threaten someone or humiliate or hurt unnecessarily or dominate or reject another human being, they become forces for the creation of psychopathology, even if these be small forces. Let them recognize that every [person] who is kind, helpful, decent, psychologically democratic, affectionate, and warn, is a psychotherapeutic force, even though a small one. (p. 254)

Clearly, the inviting tradition and the helping professions are directed by an ethical commitment to being a psychotherapeutic force, to being a blessing and contributing to the wellbeing and flourishing of others!

In this important section I identify and explore several key implications (why self-concept matters) and possible applications (what we can do in response). However, I will also elaborate on the concept of "self-concept as learner" (Combs et al., 1973), suggesting that this important element of self-concept theory can be extended beyond its original educational context. If an individual sees themselves as open to growth and learning, they are more likely to grow and learn.

Implications

My experiences with the inviting approach have positioned me to discern a number of important implications when it comes to the self-concept. Because self-concept exists and matters, there are a number of important things for those involved in the helping professions to keep in mind. First, there are multiple aspects to an individua's self-concept. Second, people are always motivated, even if it might appear otherwise. Third, it is important to seek to understand why people behave the way they do, and, in response, fourthly, to provide a context for their growth and flourishing. Fifth, it is important to seek to influence self-concept while it is open to being

formed. Sixth, we must acknowledge that, post-pandemic, western society has become more firmly entrenched, and, as a result, more likely to resist change. Finally, it is imperative that the inviting community be characterized by planting seeds for future change.

1. ***Multiple Aspects of the Self-Concept.*** One of the key insights of self-concept theory is a reminder that there are multiple aspects to the self-concept. Indeed, some may be quite distinct from each other, such as the adolescent who is a strong athlete but a weak student—their self-concept as athlete is likely markedly different from their self-concept as student, and their very different perceptions will have a visible impact on their behaviors on the sports field and in the classroom. In the context of the helping professions, self-concept aspects such as *self-concept as inviting*, *self-concept as invited*, *self-concept as helper*, *self-concept-as helped*, and *self-concept as learner* are all likely to be significant.

2. People Are Always Motivated. This key aspect of perceptual theory is also very relevant for self-concept theory. The myth of the unmotivated person must be unmasked: there is no such thing as an unmotivated person. People are motivated all the time. But they may not be motivated for the things we are motivated for, or for the things we want them to be motivated for. In the context of the helping professions and the inviting tradition, it is imperative that we recognize that people are always motivated, seek to understand what motivates the people around us, and draw on their motivations in our interactions with them and action plans for them. Motivation is a key aspect of an individual's self-concept.

3. Seeking to Understand Why People Behave the Way They Do. Perceptual theory reminds us that all behavior makes sense to the behaver in the moment of behaving, even if it might not make sense mere moments later. But at the time of their behaving, the behavior and individual chose seemed like the best thing to do at the time. This insight gets to the heart of self-concept theory: human behavior is a symptom of perception, and the most important perception when it comes to behavior is the way a person perceives themselves: their self-concept. For those in the helping professions, seeking to understand the relationship between behavior and perception is imperative. As Combs (1969) reminds us, we need to "read behavior backwards" to discern the perceptions that caused the behavior. This must inform our practice.

4. Providing a Context for Growth and Flourishing. One of the hallmarks of the inviting tradition is its confidence in the individual's ability to make responsible and appropriate choices. When obstacles are removed and challenges are identified, people are capable of making good decisions for self and others. Those in the helping professions must prioritize identifying the things that the individual perceives as obstacles, challenges, and threats, and must also seek to discern what the individual values and needs in order to identify a context for growth and flourishing. The way the individual perceives this context matters greatly, and includes safety needs, security needs, physical needs, relational needs, social needs, etc. Of course, this can be easier said than done, but the significance of such a context cannot be overlooked, given its impact on perception and behavior.

5. Influencing Self-Concept While It Is Open to Formation. We have seen that the self-concept is both stable and dynamic. Both the stability of their self-concept and the essentiality and hope implied by dynamism are important elements. We want people to be consistent in their self-concept, and we want them to be open to growing and developing. Self-concept theory reminds us that change is shaped by events and interpersonal relationships. If events and interactions are perceived to be threatening, the individual will resist change. However, if events and relationships are perceived to be supportive, change becomes possible, even in those who appear to resist change the most.

6. The Post-Pandemic Entrenchment Context. One of the things that has struck me, as the pandemic diminishes and moves further into the past, is that the pandemic has changed the way people perceive and behave around others. Being forced to compromise and sacrifice individual rights and freedoms for the sake of the potential health and safety of others has caused many to become more self-focused and less other-oriented on this side of the pandemic. Indeed, in my experience, I have seen many communities become entrenched in their identities and beliefs: more likely to be offended, more likely to lash out when others challenge them, and less capable of listening and considering. This shift is significant when it comes to self-concept. Human beings are change-resistant, and the pandemic has caused many to become even more so. This places an onus of responsibility of those in the helping professions and invitational community when it comes to recognizing and explaining that and why this is the case. We can expect opposition.

7. Planting Seeds for Future Change. Despite increased entrenchment mindsets, and the conservative nature of the self-concept, self-concept theory also reminds us that the self-concept has an inherent capacity for growth and change, even in individuals who seem the most resistant. At the heart of the invitational vision is a commitment to free will and human agency, a dedication to supporting others and providing the conditions that are likely position them to make wise and appropriate choices for self and others. This hope is also important for helping professions and the invitational tradition, who are called to plant seeds in the present in the hopes of growth and change in the future. This is a humbling reality, as it truly is "not about us," but is about the individual and their capacity for self-regulation and positive self- and other-regard.

Applications

Identifying implications provides an important context for the self-concept vision. But it is only a foundation for action. In this section, I seek to identify specific applications of self-concept theory for helping professions and the inviting community. First, it is important to work with the motivational energy that is already present. Second, we must promote positive self-regard. Third, we must pay attention to self-talk and self-pictures. Fourth, we must develop an ecological context that promotes both self- and other-regard. Finally, I will describe a specific plan for action introduced in *Developing Inviting Schools* (Purkey, Novak, and Fretz, 2020).

1. ***Working with the Motivational Energy that is Already Present.*** Perceptual theory reminds us that all people are motivated all the time. They might be motivated differently than we are, or in ways that we don't fully understand, but they are motivated. Professional helpers can leverage existing motivation, using it to support their efforts. This requires that the helper comes alongside the person they are supporting, seeking to get to know them, to understand their self-concept, and to discern what it is that they find motivating. Drawing on this knowledge, they may be positioned to influence the individual's perception and behavior, helping them to find ways to support their wellbeing and flourishing.

2. Promoting Positive Self-Regard. Self-concept theory also clearly demonstrates the power of positive self-perceptions. And this recognition is at the heart of the invitational vision: we seek to create an inviting ethos so that all community members are positioned to see self and others in a positive and optimistic light. Positive self-perceptions are contagious, creating a context for growth and flourishing. Professional helpers, as they come alongside the individuals they are

supporting, seek to identify and maximize existing strengths and abilities, looking for ways to build confidence, self-efficacy, and the potential for self-regulation and agency.

3. Paying Attention to Self-Talk and Self-Pictures. As we have noted, the way an individual perceives themselves profoundly influences their actions and choices. One of the ways people reveal their self-perception is through the ways they talk about themselves, which create an image of how they picture themselves. Professional helpers can discern the way a person perceives self by paying attention to self-talk and self-pictures (Radd, 2006). Radd (2006) notes that "self-talk/self-pictures is the process that allows 'what we say and believe' to be congruent with 'what we think and feel'" (p. 88).

4. Developing an Ecological Context that Promotes Self- and Other-Regard. Over the past decade, psychology literature has provided rich insights into the nature and power of relationships, community, and belonging. Being in a context that prioritizes people, and their wellbeing can have a marked impact on perception and behavior. Purkey and Novak (1996) describe the importance of the "ecological system," recognizing that the ecological context an individual inhabits can foster positive and realistic self-concepts. Professional helpers recognize that the communities that surround individuals profoundly shape perceptions of self and other. If an individual is a part of communities that limit or hinder self- and other-regard, something needs to change. Indeed, professional helpers may be well-positioned to initiate the process of establishing an ecological context that exercises a transformational positive impact.

5. A Specific Plan for Action. Specific action plans can be challenging to identify in an article like this, as each person's situation is unique. Professional helpers and members of the inviting tradition will need to build on their own perceptions and commitments to get to know the story of each individual they seek to support, and tailor specific action plans to their context and circumstances, as well as their specific needs and priorities. However, in *Developing Inviting Schools*, Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) introduced a very specific action plan for drawing on self-concept theory to shift the way an individual perceives and interacts with others:

> Select a student or colleague that you interact with often, who often demonstrates a negative attitude or choice of behavior. During the next few weeks, try to find opportunities to acknowledge some talent, strength, or characteristic about the person that you admire or appreciate. Observe how the person responds to you. What changes do you notice in their behavior or your relationship with that person? (p. 44)

This exercise can be done in almost any context, providing a foundation for changing perceptions and relationships.

Self-Concept as Learner

As noted earlier, each individual's self-concept includes a number of related sub-systems, key aspects of the self-concept that are context specific, yet shape and influence the person's global self-concept. There are myriad aspects that could play a significant role in supporting individual wellbeing and flourishing. Professional helpers need to discern which aspects play a significant role in the lives of the individuals they seek to support.

However, the perceptual theory tradition identified one specific aspect of the self-concept that I believe can be extended well beyond its original context. Art Combs and his colleagues (1973) introduced "Self-concept as learner" as a foundational perception for education. If a student began to perceive *self-as-learner*, their behavior shifted, creating a context for learning that may not have previously existed. This distinction is profound and has allowed teachers and educational leaders to position struggling students to turn things around. A key aspect of this shift is the fact that the student changed his or her own perceptions, leading to a marked change in behavior, which then created the context for many positive school-related experiences.

Extending Self-Concept-As-Learner Beyond the Classroom. Self-Concept as Learner, however, need not be limited to the classroom. Humans are lifelong learners, and learning extends far beyond our time in schools. If an individual perceives "self as learner," their mindset will likely be characterized by an openness to growth and learning, a teachable spirit that is always reflecting and developing. And a person who is always growing and learning is likely to have a healthy positive self-concept that supports their wellbeing and flourishing. As Combs (1973) noted, "a major way the self-concept is altered is through the addition of self-concept as learner."

The Four Factors of Self-Concept-As-Learner. Combs and his colleagues (1973) identified four key factors of self-concept as learner, (1) relating, (2) asserting, (3) investing, and (4) comping. I will primarily draw on the work of John Novak (2002) in defining each of these factors.

1. *Relating.* Relating focuses on the individual's ability to relate positively with others. As Combs and his colleagues (1973) noted, "Relating reflects a basic trust in people" (p. 9). Students who relate well to the people around them, including classmates, teachers, and the school community, are more likely to develop a positive self-concept.

2. Asserting. Asserting focuses on the balance between meeting your own needs and allowing others to have their needs met, too. Novak (2002) notes that in order to define asserting, it is helpful to place it on the continuum between aggression and acquiescence. He writes,

> To aggress is to try to meet your needs while disregarding the needs of others. To acquiesce is to disregard your needs and give in to the needs of others. Assertion, however, is an attempt to meet your needs while still respecting the needs of others. When applies to learning, assertion refers to the degree of control a person has over a situation. Those who can assert themselves do not feel that learning possibilities are out of reach, while those low in asserting have a sense of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1991), a sense that any action is futile. (p. 95)

3. Investing. Investing focuses on the individual's willingness to truly invest themselves in a situation. Combs (1973) suggests that "Investing implies a trust in one's potential. The person who feels good about oneself as a learner is more willing to risk failure or ridicule" (p. 10). Novak (2002) elaborates, writing, "Investing deals with a willingness to try new things, to look at situations in different ways and to explore unexplored ways of thinking. People who demonstrate this trait are rewarded by the enjoyment of the activity itself" (p. 96).

4. Coping. Coping focuses on the individual's ability to navigate the situations they face. Combs (1973) observes that "Coping indicates a trust in one's own academic ability. The student who scores well on coping is interested and involved in what happens in the classroom" (p. 10). Novak (2002) encapsulates this well: "Coping deals with the ability to meet expectations and not be overwhelmed." (p. 96).

Conclusion

In this concluding section I link the insights of self-concept theory back to invitational theory, then begin to explore ways the insights of self-concept theory might extend beyond the invitational community and tradition.

Linking back to Invitational Theory

I believe that an awareness of self-concept can have a powerful impact on invitational theory and practice. In this section, I explore four related issues: (1) the invitational aspect of the self-concept, (2) identifying, exploring, and improving invitational messaging, (3) recognizing that

successful helpers are *magic mirrors*, and (4) exploring the link between invitational theory, self-actualization, and flourishing.

1. The Invitational Aspect of Self-Concept. The self-concept literature reminds us that even though we all have a global self-concept, each of us also has a number of different aspects of our self-concept, unique to our own identities and values. In this context, there is value in applying perceptual language directly to the formation of an invitational self-concept: perceiving *self-concept as invited* or *self-concept as inviting* are likely to have a marked impact on human behavior. *Do we see ourselves as inviting? What causes us to believe this is the case? Do people see themselves as invited? What causes them to feel this way?* Focusing on both perception and behavior are likely to position us to ensure that our inviting intentions are being enacted and experienced by others.

2. Identify, Explore, and Improve Invitational Messaging. We have seen how important the ecological context is for the development of a positive self-concept. In this context, it is essential for communities that purport to be inviting identify, explore, and, where needed, improve their invitational messaging, ensuring that all community members are positioned to develop a healthy and positive self-concept.

3. Successful Helpers are Magic Mirrors. People working in the helping professions navigate a complex calling, seeking to support the wellbeing and flourishing of others without being overly directive or assertive. They are animated by the conviction that, when obstacles are removed and positive conditions are set in place, people have it in themselves to find their own best way. As Purkey and Schmidt (1990) have observed, "Successful helpers are magic mirrors, reflecting back the message that people are able, valuable, and capable and should behave accordingly" (p. 16).

4. Invitational Theory, Self-Actualization, and Flourishing. The authentic application of invitational theory can create the conditions to position individuals to self-actualize and flourish. At the heart of the inviting vision is a vision for both, a commitment to seeing individuals "become themselves" and to thereby grow and flourish. And self-concept is at the heart of this process.

Looking Beyond Invitational Theory

I believe we can and should take the insights of self-concept theory in the context of invitational theory one step further, with a vision for extending the invitational vision beyond the invitational community. In this section I highlight four key insights, (1) the self-concept lies at the

heart of the healing process, (2) self-concept change may be central for positive social change, (3) helping is never in vain, and (4) helping is a relational and ethical imperative.

1. The self-concept lies at the heart of the healing process. At the heart of the helping mindset is a commitment to the wellbeing and flourishing of the people they work with. In many cases, the people they work with are struggling in a variety of ways and need to experience change and healing. Combs and Avila (1985) observe that "The self-concept lies at the very heart of the healing process. A proper knowledge of the self-concept and its dynamics can add immeasurably to understanding people in need of help" (p. 45). However, the value extends beyond simply knowing about self-concept. Combs and Avila add, "It can also provide the guidelines by which people in the helping professions may focus their practice more effectively and efficiently and therefore contribute greater certainty to the health and growth of clients" (p. 45).

2. Self-concept change may be central for affecting positive social change. The people who are supported by professional helpers often experience brokenness and harm, and this often carries over into their families and communities. Fitts (1981) makes a powerful argument that self-concept could play a central role in affecting positive social change, writing:

> I have visualized the issue of self-concept change as central to all of our society. To me, this is the real issue underlying so many others that plague us—crime and delinquency, mental illness, racial conflict, alcoholism, drug abuse, marital misery, and many other people-related problems. In that sense, it is easy for me to view the institutions, agencies, and movements who deal with those problems as essentially concerned with self-concept change. (p. 261-262)

3. Helping is never in vain. Helping is about planting seeds of hope for the future. Helping is not always effective. Sometimes our best intentions and intention-rooted actions do not bear fruit. In such a context it is easy to become disheartened and disillusioned. But this does not negate the value of their good work. It may one day make a difference. As Combs and Avila (1985) observe,

> Every good thing a helper does is forever. It may not be enough, but it is never futile. There is always the further possibility that someone else may contribute something elsewhere, and such cumulative experiences may in time be sufficient to bring about the changes hoped for. (p. 45)

4. Helping is a Relational and Ethical Imperative. Professional helpers seek to support wellbeing and flourishing on both the local and global level. Their immediate and primary focus is on the individuals they work with. But the vision extends beyond those individuals, to their families and communities. Helping is both a relational and ethical imperative. Helpers truly believe in the potential of the people, and do all they can to support their agency, autonomy, and self-efficacy, each of which is firmly rooted in their self-concept. And in so doing, they may position the people they work with to have a transformational impact on the people they interact with. Planting seeds of hope may bloom in unexpected ways.

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