

# DONALD SNYGG & ARTHUR W. COMBS

[ 1904 - 1967 ]

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## PERSONALITY THEORIES

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## **Introduction**

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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. Although they say very similar things, Carl Rogers' theory sounds more radical, George Kelly's more scientific, and European phenomenology more philosophical. But Snygg and Combs' theory is well worth a look.

## **The phenomenal field**

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First, "all behavior, without exception, is completely determined by and pertinent to the **phenomenal field** of the behaving organism." The phenomenal field is our subjective reality, the world we are aware of, including physical objects and people and their behaviors, thoughts, images, fantasies, feelings, and ideas like justice, freedom, equality, and so on. Snygg and Combs emphasize, above all else, that it is this phenomenal field that is the true subject-matter for psychology.

And so, if we wish to understand and predict people's behavior, we need to get at their phenomenal field. Since we can't observe it directly, we need to infer it from the things we can observe. We can record behavior, give various tests, talk to the person, and so on – Snygg and Combs are open to a variety of methods. If we have a variety of observers as well, we will eventually come to understand the person's phenomenal field.

And then you are set to understand and predict the person's behavior, since, as the quote above says, all their behavior will follow as a reasonable, meaningful, purposeful response to the person's phenomenal field.

## **One motive**

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Which brings us to Snygg and Combs' understanding of motivation: "The basic need of everyone is to preserve and enhance the **phenomenal self**, and the characteristics of all parts of the field are governed by this need." The phenomenal self is the person's own view of him- or herself. This view is developed over a lifetime, and is based on the person's physical characteristics (as he or she sees them), cultural upbringing (as he or she experiences it), and other, more personal, experiences.

Note that it is the phenomenal self we try to maintain and enhance. This is more than mere physical survival or the satisfaction of basic needs. The body and its needs are a likely part of the self, but not an inevitable one. A teenager who attempts suicide, a soldier seeking martyrdom, or a prisoner on a hunger strike are not serving their bodies well. But they are maintaining, perhaps even enhancing, their own images of who they are. Their physical existences no longer hold the same meanings to them as they might to us.

And note that we are talking not only about maintaining, but about enhancing the self. We don't just want to be what we are. We often want to be more. Snygg and Combs' basic motivational principle contains within it Alfred Adler's ideas about compensation of inferiority and striving for superiority, Abraham Maslow's self-actualization, and all sorts of related concepts.

We become "more," according to Snygg and Combs, by means of **differentiation**, a process that involves pulling a figure out of a background. Learning is not a matter of connecting a stimulus and a response or one stimulus with another or even one response with another. Learning is a matter of improving the quality of one's phenomenal field by extracting some detail from the confusion, because that detail is important, is meaningful, to the person.

This is, of course, the same thing as George Kelly's idea of constructs: As a child, the color of someone's skin may be irrelevant; later, others show the child that color is important. Color comes out of the background; black is differentiated from white; the contrast is learned. Why? Not, in this case, because the child has been shown a connection between color and the quality of someone's character, but because a child cannot afford to ignore the differentiations his or her "significant others" make.

The example shows how nicely the theory applies to both developmental and social psychological issues. As children and as adults, alone or in the presence of others, we maintain and enhance our sense of who we are by refining and re-refining the differentiation we make.

## Applied psychology

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Snygg and Combs address clinical concerns by adding the concept of **threat**. Threat is "the awareness of menace to the phenomenal self". Ideally, the threat is met with appropriate actions and new differentiations that enhance the person's ability to deal with similar threats in the future.

If the person doesn't have the organization to deal with the threat in this way, he or she may resort to stop-gap, sand-bag measures that, while they may remove the threat for the moment, don't actually serve the self in the long-run. Defenses, neurotic and psychotic symptoms, and even criminal behavior is explained in this way.

Therapy, then, becomes a matter of freeing clients from the dead-end perceptions and behaviors and cognitions and emotions they have set up to protect themselves from threat. "Therapy is the provision of a facilitating situation wherein the normal drive of the organism for maintenance or enhancement of organization is freed to operate." And, consistent with Snygg and Combs' flexible and pragmatic approach, this can be done by active intervention by a therapist or by enabling the client to discover his or her own differentiations, depending on the individual's needs.

Snygg and Combs also pay a lot of attention to education, and **meaning** is their favorite term here. Learning occurs when the differentiations involved have direct relevance to the individual's needs, that is, when learning is meaningful to that individual.

As long as teachers insist on forcing material that, from the students' perspective, has no relevance to them or their lives, education will be a arduous process. It is curious that a boy who can't remember the times tables can remember baseball statistics back to the stone age, or a girl who can't write a coherent paragraph can tell stories that would make Chaucer proud. If calculus or Shakespeare or any number of subjects we feel children should learn seem to be so difficult for them, it is not because the children are dumb. It is because they don't see any reason for learning them. Teachers must get to know their students, because the motivation to learn is "inside" them, in their phenomenal fields and phenomenal selves.

## **Readings**

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To learn more about their theory, I suggest you read Snygg and Combs' *Individual Behavior*.

Ten years later, Combs released a new edition, called *Individual Behavior: A Perceptual Approach to Behavior*, which replaced "phenomenological" with "perceptual," presumably in an effort to make the approach more acceptable to a predominantly behaviorist audience.

Combs, with Donald Avila and William Purkey, also wrote *Helping Relationships*, which applies the theory to education, social work, therapy, and so on.