Arthur Wright Combs: A Humanistic Pioneer

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Arthur Wright Combs (1912–1999) championed humanistic counseling and education. He proposed a theory that incorporated humanistic values and cognitive factors. This article features a review of his contributions, an overview of his theory, a synthesis of stories about Combs that were acquired during research interviews, and my commentary on his legacy.

Art decried treating people as things. He insisted on the right and responsibility of persons to choose their own best ways, using their own best judgments. His supportive presence enabled others to feel respected and encouraged to an extent rarely experienced. His empowering mentorship, commitment to a universally meaningful psychology, and pivotal clarity of thought and expression will be sorely missed.

—Richards & Gonzalez, 2000, p. 1150

Arthur Wright Combs was a beacon for humanistic education, educational leadership, and counseling during the last half of the 20th Century. He was a leader in education reform whose contributions were recognized and respected by other leaders. His self-proclaimed most meaningful research was related to the qualities of good helpers, which he conducted at the University of Florida.

He authored over 150 articles and more than 20 books, which have been translated into at least eight languages. Individual Behavior: A New Frame of Reference for Psychology (Snygg & Combs, 1949) provided the foundation for his perceptual–experiential theory of therapy, which he later detailed in A Theory of Therapy: Guidelines for Counseling Practice (Combs, 1989). He continually and dynamically translated his theory and research to contemporary practice. For example, Helping Relationships: Basic Concepts for the Helping Professions (4th ed., Combs & Gonzalez, 1994) was originally published in 1971. Being and Becoming: A Field Approach to Psychology (Combs, 1999) provided a synthesis of his theory. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development published books related to education, such as...
as On Becoming a School Leader: A Person-Centered Challenge (Combs, Miser, & Whitaker, 1999).

Combs received recognition for his contributions and outstanding research from the American Personnel and Guidance Association (forerunner for the American Counseling Association). The John Dewey Society honored him for distinguished service to contemporary education. He was recognized by the American Psychological Association for “groundbreaking contributions to psychological theory, education reform, and research in the helping professions” (Richards & Gonzalez, 2000, p. 1150). He was a fellow in four divisions of the American Psychological Association and a president of the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Combs died in Greeley, Colorado, on March 21, 1999. During his final professional years, Combs was a distinguished professor at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC). Prior to his death, Combs participated in a series of interviews conducted by David Welch, another member of the UNC faculty, and Christine Breier, a Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral student (Welch & Breier, 1997). These interviews, books, and articles written by Combs; books and articles about Combs; and additional interviews conducted with research contributors document the magnitude of Combs’s legacy—a legacy that included multiple levels of influence on individuals, mental health professions, education, and society. Even though Combs’s presence in the founding of humanistic psychology, counseling, and education was prominent, his name rarely appears in contemporary literature.

I visited UNC as a candidate for a faculty appointment and was disappointed to learn that Combs had died approximately one year earlier. With authorization from the Institutional Review Board and funding from the University’s Sponsored Programs and Academic Research Center and the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, I initiated a formal inquiry to acquire information about Combs from people who knew him well during the last years of his life. A primary goal of these activities was to portray the man through the eyes of family members, colleagues, and protégés. A secondary goal was to synthesize these subjective accounts with the videotaped interviews of Combs, literature he wrote, and literature that was written about him.

The purposes of this article are three-fold: (a) to portray the person of Combs as experienced by people who knew him well; (b) to recapitulate his contributions to counseling, psychology, and education; and (c) to suggest the relevance of his contributions to contemporary counseling. The article features a summary of my research method, a biographical sketch, a review of Combs’s theory and research, and a synthesis of stories about Combs acquired during research interviews. The conclusion includes my commentary on his legacy, contemporary relevance, and implications.

METHOD

To accomplish these purposes, I adhered to qualitative inquiry guidelines for interpretive biographical studies (Creswell, 1998, 2007; Denzin, 1989).
Interpretive biography was particularly appropriate because its philosophical underpinnings are consistent with the personality, life, and beliefs of Combs. For example, Denzin (1989) and other interpretive biographers have recognized the subjective and intersubjective nature of knowledge, personal experiences, and interpersonal relationships. Denzin (1989) noted that “interpreting and making sense out of something creates the conditions for understanding, which involves being able to grasp the meanings of an interpreted experience of another individual” (p. 28); this parallels essential elements of Combs’s theory.

Interpretive biographers endeavor to “tell and inscribe stories” provided by personal acquaintances in order to “construct the history of a life” (Creswell, 1998, pp. 48, 49). They recognize the value of data derived from informal conversations, formal interviews, archival literature, journals, and observations. Within this framework of inquiry, meaning, interpretation, and critical reflection are valued and respected; thus less emphasis is given to validity, reliability, and theoretical relevance. The researcher and his or her perspectives are inextricable elements of the inquiry; he or she also respects the readers’ various perspectives. Trustworthiness is demonstrated through thick and contextual description, congruence among information derived from various sources, and review provided by research participants (Creswell, 2007; Denzin; 1989).

Interviews with colleagues, protégés, and family members were a prominent source of information for this interpretive biography. These subjective descriptions provided unique “windows into the inner life” of Combs (Denzin, 1989, p. 14). I also documented comments offered during conversations with educators and mental health professionals who knew Combs. Concurrently (and following Denzin’s guidelines), I examined literature by and about Combs. As information from these sources coalesced, I identified themes and words that described Combs, his theory, his influences, his contributions, and his legacy.

At the time the interviews were conducted, I was an associate professor of counselor education at UNC. Prior to designing the inquiry, I sought guidance from an associate professor of statistics and research methods at UNC. During the initial data collection phase, a doctoral student in counselor education and supervision assisted. She contributed to the interview protocol composition, the audiotaped interviews, and the transcription of the interviews to text. She also conducted interviews.

Interview Procedures

The interviews were designed to be interactive and guided by contributors. Prior to conducting the interviews, the research assistant or I reviewed research procedures to ensure that contributors adequately understood the parameters of the study in order to give informed consent. We also asked permission to acknowledge participation, thereby superseding the general practice of assuring anonymity; such permission was given by each contributor.
We then sought answers to general questions focused on contributors’ (a) relationships with Combs, (b) descriptions of him, and (c) perceptions of his contributions. We asked each contributor “How did Dr. Combs influence your life or your career?” The final question was “What would you like to tell me about Dr. Combs that I did not think to ask?”

I acknowledge my a priori respect for Combs and my humanistic orientation to counseling and education. I further acknowledge my desire to document his contributions, particularly to the counseling profession. I did not have the opportunity to meet Combs and believe my investment in recognizing his contributions enhanced, rather than interfered with, my ability to accurately synthesize and convey contributors’ responses to the queries.

Contributing Family Members, Colleagues, and Protégés

Requests for participation were initially extended to university colleagues who knew Combs. Additional requests for participation were based on recommendations from research contributors (snowball sampling). Two daughters, four psychologists, and two educators of teachers participated in interviews. Additional comments were derived from conversations with protégés and educators at the UNC Laboratory School (now University Schools, which is no longer affiliated with UNC), which was attended by two of Combs’s daughters.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

My respect for Combs demanded thorough attention to established conventions addressing qualitative research rigor at each element of the inquiry. I initially reviewed three transcripts (from one counseling psychologist, one educator, and one family member) and noted emergent themes. I compared themes across the three transcripts and categorized contributions within (a) nature of relationships, (b) Combs: The person, (c) influence on individuals, (d) relationships with students and groups, (e) teaching, (f) legacy for psychology and counseling, (g) legacy for education, (h) field theory, and (i) effective helpers. I then coded the remaining transcripts, with attention to convergent and divergent themes. The original categories were then consolidated to include (a) his qualities, (b) a gifted teacher, (c) his theory and approach as described by contributors, (d) Combs’s legacy to individuals, and (e) contributors’ accounts of Combs’s professional legacy. My final step was to consider findings from the interviews in context of the extant literature, which was incorporated into the composition of the article (triangulation).

As I neared completion of this project, Combs’s autobiography was published (Combs, 2006). Corroboration in detail, inference, and impression was consistently recognized. As an additional verification of accuracy, I asked two original research contributors and four additional contributors who worked with Combs to review and critique the article (respondent
validation). The common response was that the essence of Combs was accurately communicated through the article. They reported that they enjoyed reminiscing about their experiences with Combs as they read. One suggested that it was “warmly written,” which was appropriate because Combs was such a warm man. Following the recommendations of Creswell (2007) and Denzin (1989) in the preparation of this document, I endeavored to provide contextual and historic factors as well as thick description of his contributions. Thus, I am confident that this portrayal of Combs, his contributions, and his influences is accurate.

ARTHUR WRIGHT COMBS: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Childhood

Combs was born in 1912 in Newark, New Jersey. Thus he grew up without television or computers. He had a younger brother and a younger sister. His maternal grandfather was a successful businessman despite his limited education (Combs, 2006). His paternal grandparents embraced conservative religious ideology and displayed pride in their accomplishments. They did not approve of their son’s marriage to Arthur Comb’s mother. Little was known about her German family of origin. Her parents died when she was a child, and she lived with her grandmother. Rather than complete school, she sought employment. Such disparity adversely affected the relationships of Arthur Combs’s family, particularly between his mother and father, and most prominently between his mother and her parents-in-law (Arthur Combs’s paternal grandparents).

In efforts to overcome a sense of inadequacy, inferiority, and the disapproval of her parents-in-law, Arthur Combs’s mother held high expectations for her behavior and that of her children. In public, Arthur Comb’s mother referred to her husband, a veterinarian, as “Dr. Combs”. Nonetheless, Arthur Combs’s father appreciated and admired his wife and typically acquiesced to her preferences (Combs, 2006).

As a child, Arthur Combs was confused by his mother’s expectations, anxiety, and inconsistency. Like his mother, he felt rejected and inadequate. Fearing her disapproval, he was also anxious. Such anxiety manifested itself in Saint Vitus’ Dance, which was treated with arsenic.

Combs found solace as a student. Like his father, Arthur Combs was a successful student who loved to read. He was also a gymnast and swimmer. Because of his family’s interest in dog breeding and showing, he acquired this additional area of expertise.

Emergence into Adulthood, Family Responsibilities, and Fatherhood

Upon graduation from high school in 1930, Combs attended Cornell University with a major in scientific agriculture. He met Mildred Mitchell at
the end of his sophomore year. A few years later, they married, and Combs continued his education at Ohio State University, where he enrolled in the teacher education program (Combs, 2006). His professional career began as a high school science and biology teacher.

Art and Mildred’s daughter, Carol Andrea, was born in 1939. Peter Arthur was born a few years later. The young couple fielded financial problems and intermittent relationship challenges for several years (Combs, 2006). Ultimately Art and Mildred were divorced. In the late 1970s, Art and Susan Kannel were married. Their daughters, Lynn Ann and Erin Elizabeth, were born in Greeley, Colorado.

Introduction to Psychology

As a young teacher, Combs quickly realized the extent to which he enjoyed working with students, particularly in extracurricular activities. He recognized students’ needs that exceeded his level of preparation, and reenrolled at Ohio State University to take courses toward a degree in school counseling.

During his graduate work at Ohio State University, Combs met and worked with Carl Rogers, who became a prominent mentor and friend. They also shared a counseling relationship that became a powerful experience for Combs. He disclosed this experience in his autobiography.

As my anxiety increased, I sought counseling from Carl Rogers. The five or six sessions we had laid the foundations from which further growth could proceed. During our sessions I explored relationships with my parents and came to understand the origins of many of my difficulties. I became aware of the source of my feelings of rejection and inadequacy. More importantly, I began to give up my unrealistic expectations of affirmation from my parents. Someone has said, “Sooner or later each of us must give up hope of having a better past.” That is essentially what I accomplished. Counseling set me free to experience vital new growth. . . . The nondirective technique was just what I needed to help me explore the relationships of my childhood home. That experience made it possible for me to cut loose from my neurotic expectations of my parents. Giving up those hopes set me free to pursue fulfillment elsewhere. It paved the way for further growth of myself. (Combs, 2006, pp. 56–57, 59)

Upon completing his coursework, Combs accepted a faculty position at Syracuse University. He completed his dissertation, strengthened the clinical program at Syracuse, saw clients, and began receiving invitations to speak to professionals in a variety of sectors.

Despite clear and diverse evidence that he was a successful, well respected professor and psychologist, Combs struggled with personal challenges. Again, he sought counsel from a friend and colleague, Ted Landsman. Again, he candidly disclosed his experience in writing.

I poured out my heart in a way I had never done before, holding nothing back. Then one day, in a moment I still recall in sharpest detail, I said to Ted, “Ted, you’re an awfully nice guy.” Then, almost at once, I was astounded to hear myself say, “But,
you know, so am I," and I burst into tears. . . . I was overwhelmed by the experience. As we continued to talk, a sense of peace and contentment spread over me. . . . I was beginning to accept myself. The scales were falling from my eyes. (Combs, 2006, p. 80)

Perceptual Psychology: A Humanistic Approach to the Study of Persons

In the mid-1940s, Combs met Donald Snygg, a New York State University professor who taught classes at Syracuse University. Snygg casually gave the reprint of an article, “The Need for a Phenomenological System in Psychology,” (Snygg, 1941) to Combs, who laid it aside. This event, though seemingly insignificant, coincided with Combs’s quest for a theoretical connection between behavior and meaning and the significance of empathy when working with clients.

Some months later, Combs took the article on a trip, thinking he might have time to read it en route. In Combs’s (2006) words, the article struck him “like a bolt of lightning.” (p. 86)

Suddenly I found clear answers to many of my unanswered questions about psychology. So much began to fall into place. I was astounded. What had seemed so confusing and inconsistent in current psychology now fell neatly into an orderly, systematic whole.

I sat there playing with ideas like a child putting a puzzle together, then tearing it apart for the fun of putting it back together again. (p. 86)

Combs’s excitement with this “intellectual conversion experience” created a sense of urgency (Siu-Runyon, 2000, p. 7). He contacted Snygg. They met the following day and began their collaboration on Individual Behavior: A New Frame of Reference for Psychology (Snygg & Combs, 1949). Combs and Snygg developed perceptual theory as an explanation for relationships between human experience and behavior. This became the unifying frame of reference for Combs’s counseling, teaching, research, and relationships.

A revision was published in 1959 with the subtitle, A Perceptual Approach to Behavior (Combs and Snygg, 1959). Collaborating with Anne and Fred Richards, Combs revised the book, Perceptual Psychology: A Humanistic Approach to the Study of Persons, which was published in 1988 (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1988).

Effective Helpers Research

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.

The following is excerpted from an article in Educational Leadership that Combs wrote in 1978:

A series of researches [sic] at the Universities of Florida, Northern Colorado, and Massachusetts corroborates this “self as instrument” concept of teaching. Effective and ineffective teachers could be clearly discriminated on the basis of their perceptual organizations or belief systems. From these studies, it is apparent that good teaching is a product of attributes in five major areas:

1. Empathic qualities. Good teachers are phenomenologically oriented. They are keenly aware of the perceptions of other people and use this understanding as the primary frame of reference for guiding their own behavior.
2. Positive self-concept. Good teachers see themselves in essentially positive ways.
3. Beliefs about other people. Good teachers characteristically see other people in positive ways as able, trustworthy, friendly, and so on.
4. Open, facilitating purposes. The purposes of good teachers are primarily broad, facilitating, and process-oriented.
5. Authenticity. Good teachers are essentially self-revealing and genuine. (p. 558)

Combs and his colleagues extended the research to other helping professions. They found that the characteristics attributed to effective teachers also applied to counselors, ministers, nurses, and managers (Combs & Gonzalez, 1994). He consistently contended that belief systems, rather than methods used or knowledge acquired, were the primary elements of effective helping (Combs & Gonzalez, 1994; Dolliver & Patterson, 1994). He further suggested that “the process of becoming a helper is never complete.” (Combs & Gonzalez, 1994, p. 29)

ARTHUR WRIGHT COMBS: PERCEPTUAL THEORY

Though Combs’s theory was a precursor to evidence-based practice, he clearly respected the importance of basing work on well confirmed theories and research. In the development of his theory, he studied quantum physics, astronomy, and biology. He recognized the relevance of scientifically based field theory to the understanding of human behavior (Combs, 1999).

Combs was among the first theorists to offer a bridge between the polarized beliefs of the humanists and the behaviorists. He recognized the importance of providing a theoretical framework that encompassed internal and external factors, as opposed to internal or external factors. In this regard, he contended that all behaviors are a function of an individual’s beliefs about and experiences in the world. The theory is based on the premise that “human beings in this vast system are themselves living organizations forever in search of the maintenance and enhancement of order or identity.” (Combs, 1999, p. 5)

An essential assumption underlying perceptual theory is that people can, will, and must move toward health if the way seems open for them to do
so (Combs, 1989, 1999). Their ability to recognize options toward health is broadened or limited by their perceptual field. Broadly defined, the perceptual field is the entire universe as an individual experiences it at any given point in time; it includes the individual and his or her belief system. The field encompasses experiences with relationships, emotional reactions and responses, observations, and explanations of those observations. In this regard, each individual’s perceptual field is his or her reality and unique scope of awareness. This field of meaning is responsible for every behavior (Combs, 1999); nonetheless, it is rarely examined or questioned.

Self-concept is an enduring and core component of personality that is learned; it is derived from experiences and relationships throughout life. Self-concept includes individuals’ beliefs about themselves vis-à-vis others and the environment. Self-concept also comprises value judgments about their abilities and relationships. For example, an actor may perceive himself as talented and audience-engaging on the stage, but minimally adequate and disengaged as a father. If the father role is perceived as more significant, that lower value becomes a more salient contributor to the man’s self-concept.

Self-concept and the perceptual field are simultaneously dynamic and consistent. Stability derives from the organization around one’s core and long-term self-definitions or self-descriptions, which resist change; each individual experiences his or her perceptual field as solid and accurate regardless of contradictory information. However, some aspects of the self-concept, such as age or occupation, are transient. Life experiences provide opportunities for self-examination, growth, and change.

The process of change often follows a sequence of self-awareness (i.e., “this is who I am”), self-acceptance (i.e., “it is alright to be who I am”), self-appreciation (i.e., “it is good to be who I am”), and recognition of freedom to become self-directing (i.e., “I am free to consider who I want to become”) (Gonzalez, 2007). Combs suggested that individuals modify their self-concept (a) when they interact with others and with their environment, and (b) when they recognize incongruity between their perceptions of themselves and reality (Combs, 1989). Change is more readily effected through awareness and perception; direct experiences affect development of these perceptions more than spoken words (Combs, 1999).

View of Psychological Health

Combs referred to self-actualization and fulfillment as goals of therapy, or representative of psychological health. Similar to other humanist leaders, he described health as a process rather than an outcome. He contended that self-actualized individuals perceive themselves as “liked, wanted, acceptable, able persons of dignity and integrity” (Combs, 1989, p. 66, 75). They encounter new experiences with acceptance and confidence rather than fear. They engage in relationships with affiliation, interdependence, identification, and investment. Finally, they are knowledgeable and resource-
ful; discovery of information and examination of its meaning are integral to this facet of psychological health.

Etiology of Problems

As previously mentioned, Combs contended that all behaviors are a function of each individual’s phenomenological world; people behave in ways that are consistent with their view of the world. Thus, behavior results from individuals’ perceptual field, which is dynamic. How individuals perceive themselves and the situation contributes to their goals and actions. For the individual, every action seems reasonable and necessary (Combs, 1999).

When people doubt their ability to adequately handle a situation, they experience vulnerability. This sense of threat stems from six circumstances: (a) their perception of the situation, (b) lack of information or the unknown, (c) inconsistent perceptions of themselves, (d) situations posing a dilemma, (e) multiple unaccepted aspects of themselves, and (f) diminished self-differentiation. For example, someone with a self-concept primarily consisting of negative self-definitions may attribute increased magnitude to a relatively minor challenge. His or her perception of limited personal resources and a propensity toward self-deprecation would likely manifest in self-doubt and limited recognition of options, particularly when encountering ambiguity or uncertainty. This individual may become excessively indecisive or reliant on others. He or she may resort to anger as a protective factor. Regardless, Combs contended that it is possible to change perceptions of and beliefs about threatening situations, despite the power of irrational and irresponsible self-protecting thoughts and actions (Combs, 1999).

Role of the Counselor

Combs (1989) emphasized that “good counselors could be differentiated from poor ones by the nature of their perceptions or beliefs about the people with whom they worked. Effective counselors see people as able, dependable, friendly, and worthy. Less effective counselors have serious doubts about such human qualities in their clients” (p. 76).

Accordingly, it is essential that counselors appreciate and understand clients’ experiences and the meanings attributed to those experiences (Combs, 1989). Thus, counselors who work from this theory rely on accurate and advanced empathy to explore clients’ phenomenological worlds (i.e., their experience of the world). In fact, Combs (1989) contended that “empathy lies at the very heart of the counseling experience” (p. 37). Combs (1999) described feelings as an avenue for communicating the “personal meaning of an event” (p. 61), a “shorthand” description of perceptual fields at a particular moment. Behaviors are an indication of what is going on in the perceptual field rather than a result of feelings.
Within this context, Combs underscored the importance of authenticity and sensitivity in offering a therapeutic experience to clients that differs from their other relationships. Such relationships grant the opportunity for clients to experience total acceptance, which invites self-discovery of alternate explanations for their situations, histories, and environments. In this regard, Combs contended that the discovery of personal meaning is the crux—both process and outcome—of counseling and education. Combs likened counseling to growing a plant; when given the right conditions, plants thrive (Combs, 1989).

Thus, a primary goal in counseling is to maximize challenge and minimize vulnerability. The counseling process is guided by key questions. “Does this technique assist my client in accepting self and the world? Is the atmosphere I am creating encouraging openness to experience? Am I demonstrating by my own behavior that acceptance and openness are possible? Am I conveying to my client that she need not fear her experience?” (Combs, 1989, p. 77).

COLLEAGUES, PROTÉGÉS, AND FAMILY MEMBERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH ARTHUR WRIGHT COMBS

The electronic recorders captured the digital messages of the informants who were interviewed for this inquiry. The analogical communication could not be recorded. Contributors’ eyes often appeared to have tears, and their voice tones often softened with what appeared to be deep respect, admiration, tenderness, caring, and closeness. A former student and colleague talked about Combs’s “enduring friendships and lifelong friends,” which became apparent throughout the conduct of this inquiry.

Contributors also described Combs’s devotion to his four children who are now in varying stages of their careers, experiencing full and successful lives. He retired during his two younger daughters’ adolescence, which enabled him to be more involved in their activities at a time when father involvement was uncommon. He taxied them to sporting events and actively participated in their activities.

For example, one of his daughters took a class that Combs taught while she was in high school. Another daughter described the numerous times her father was a guest speaker in her middle and high school classes, and how proud she was of him and the contributions he made to her life.

Combs’s eldest daughter recounted a story of smoking while visiting her father. He simply asked, “Have you ever thought about what that’s doing to you?” She talked about how powerful that question was because he asked her to think about what she was doing rather than telling her what she should do.

His Qualities

Combs’s daughter described him as “insightful, funny, and very stubborn.” She added that he was a “wonderful, wonderful man,
although not a saint. He was human.” Another daughter described him as “complex.”

**Authentic and powerfully present.** The contributors consistently described Combs as highly authentic in all areas of his life, particularly in his relationships. For example, one colleague described his personal uneasiness with Combs’s strong authentic nature, saying [Combs was] “one of the most caring, nurturing individuals I’ve ever met in my life. Unbelievable, almost to a fault. As a matter of fact, I could pretty much honestly say the extent to which he was a caring, nurturing person made me almost, at times, uncomfortable.” Three other contributors spoke of “a powerful affective presence [that was] intimidating at times.”

Another former colleague described Combs’s presence and “freeing effect” on others by saying:

> He channeled his life through being a real person who was whoever you met. That’s who he was. He wanted to be a person without pretense. When you’re in the presence of someone who is authentic, [it is] a very powerful thing. And that’s the kind of thing that happened when people were in Art’s presence. They experienced somebody who was very authentic.

Contributors also described a powerful presence with words such as “He looked you in the eye. When he shook hands, he reduced the distance. He pulled you closer. . . . His presence was immediately felt.” One protégé said, “When I was with him, I felt like the most important person in the world to him at that moment.”

**Empowering.** Combs also had an extraordinary ability to empower and inspire others. A former colleague offered a representative comment about this quality: “When people left, they had the feeling that they wanted to go write or create something, and that was, I think, what was inspired by talking with Art. . . . He inspired people to become excellent.” A contributor who reviewed the article added, “He did this for me. He did this for everyone around him.” Another former colleague said that he attributed his professional contributions to the “inspiration, support, and knowledge” of Combs.

**Kind, caring, and respectful.** Consistent with his philosophy, Combs modeled his deep respect for, and confidence in, people with whom he interacted and humankind in general, even though humans disappointed him from time to time. A former colleague said Combs was “warm. He made you feel like he was glad to see you, and he would tell you that.” Another colleague described him as “down to earth, approachable, kind, caring, compassionate, thoughtful, and easy to be with.” She added that he was a hard worker and a good listener.

His kindness was seemingly enduring without compromising his authenticity and integrity. As one contributor said, “He had no doubts about what he believed. He knew his own point of view. He was not disrespectful. In his own polite way, when he took a position, he did not budge.”
Setting these attributes in a classroom context, a protégé said:

Art Combs lived all the qualities of effective teachers. He practiced what he preached. He had no hidden agendas. He just wanted what was best for children and learners of all ages. He was humble, grateful, and brave. He was soft spoken, and listened intently to what one had to say. He also had a subtle sense of humor and was not afraid to speak his truth, but never ever did he put others down. He just offered another perspective. . . . He was honest and truthful, and so very joyful, and immensely kind. There was not a mean bone in his body.

Humble. Despite his vast accomplishments, Combs was humble and sometimes shy. “He was not a showman at all.” Such humility was documented in the intense positive regard Combs expressed for his mentors and colleagues. For example, he wrote, “I am deeply grateful to Carl Rogers on two counts: professionally, for introducing me to the field of psychotherapy, and personally, for my experience in therapy with him. . . . I am glad I have known this man. I love him dearly and treasure his influence on me as well as on the profession” (Combs, 1995, pp. 170–171). He concluded a recorded interview (Welch & Breier, 1997) by saying

I hate to talk about how I differ from Carl Rogers because many people jump to the conclusion that when I say that I’ve moved beyond him, that somehow this is a denigration of his work, and that is something I would never want to do. . . . I’m very keenly aware that I could not have gone beyond Rogers unless I was standing on his shoulders. If you stand on somebody’s shoulders, you can see further than they could. But also, keep in mind whose shoulders you’re standing on.

These comments are representative of Combs’s overt expression of appreciation for his many mentors, colleagues, students, and friends.

A Gifted Teacher

Contributors consistently praised Combs’s pedagogy. He was a “spellbinder.” “There was such smooth delivery. And his hands, his gestures, were delicate and refined.” He “could tell wonderful stories that illustrated his points . . . almost like parables.” He used “examples of things to clarify principles he was trying to get across.” An educator recalled his thoughts while watching Combs speak in his class. “He’s got the bullets in his mind. He knows how to deliver these things to students with great examples. And I thought, ‘There’s a teacher. There’s a teacher.’” This contributor cited David Johnson, a well-known educator, who had asserted during a casual conversation that Combs “was one of the truly great figures in American education.”

Combs demonstrated the value he placed on individuals, even when speaking to groups. For example, a former student and colleague said, “You would come away from one of his speeches feeling, as a teacher, like you were the most important thing in the world, not that he was the most important.”
His Theory and Approach as Described by Contributors

Many of the contributors spoke of Combs’s theoretical perspective as “a theoretical, philosophical foundation for everything.” Evidence of his commitment to “keeping people focused on the link between behavior and experience” is paramount. A psychologist described Combs’s theory by saying,

It was a brand new way of looking at human beings and it was related to the way in which Carl Rogers talked about people. . . . People come to a place of accepting who they are, discovering “this is who I am.” After they reach that—and that could be a great point of discovery—then they move to the belief that that is actually all right. Then, at some later stage, that it’s good. Not only that it’s all right, but that it’s good. And that’s what frees people to become. And that’s the change process. . . . No matter what the problem was, there was always an answer. There is an answer. You may not have found it yet, but there is an answer. He didn’t think there were any unsolvable problems.

Another psychologist offered a review of field theory by saying, “People who are unhappy, ineffective, not actualizing . . . have blocked their perception.” This contributor elaborated by saying,

Not because they do not want to look at it, but because they have not looked at it. They don’t see it. [And, when they do see it], “Oh! This is why it is.” Once you expand your awareness you have more information and that information allows you to make more effective decisions. And those insights can be freeing. When the person says, “I don’t have to do it this way. I can do it a different way. I can be somebody else.” And that is, in a nutshell, the process of psychotherapy—that you explore your own awareness, explore your experiences, explore what you are doing and make the connections, and have new insights. And through that [you] understand that there are better ways of doing things. People as a rule always do the right thing from their own internal perspective. In that sense, his theory was cognitive. It is about perception, about changing perception.

As previously discussed, Combs also emphasized the personal qualities of teachers, psychologists, counselors, and other professional helpers. An educator shared his memory of Combs’s admonition that “You are really perfecting your instrument, your helping instrument.” The contributor emphasized Combs’s influence in this area by saying,

That was key to me. Using yourself as an instrument. [I remember Art saying] “Consider that an agenda. Consider that your personal portfolio. How can you better be able to share yourself? How can you better be opening yourself to experience? How can you better be accepting? How can you stretch your limits of finding something you like in every kid in your classroom? Put these on your platter because they’re going to turn the key to you being an effective professional.”

His daughter’s description of his theory was more succinct; yet she captured an essential cornerstone. “Dad was never big on rats. He was into people.” She added that “Prevention was better than a cure.”
**Arthur Wright Combs's Legacy to Individuals**

Two of Combs's former colleagues emphasized the enduring nature of their relationship. One said, “Art speaks to me still. I still hear his voice.” Another elaborated on this phenomenon by saying,

As I talk to my students about behavior and behavioral problems in the classroom, I say, “Know this.”

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.” In a [faculty] meeting one time, I said, “I’m sorry. I guess I had Art Combs whispering in my ear.” I don’t think I could go through certainly a week of teaching, without thinking of Art.

A protégé summarized her thoughts about Combs by focusing on the impact of his theory and beliefs on her personal as well as professional interactions. She explained that

[Dr. Combs] provided me with a frame of reference that just helps me enormously going through life. I’ve discovered that I don’t get upset about things that some people get upset about because I understand people are just trying to be adequate and do the best they can under the circumstances, and they’re doing the same thing I’m trying to do, and I don’t think they’re malicious and awful and terrible and all this stuff. I just try to figure out what they are thinking, what’s their experience, so it’s just provided a solid foundation for my professional work and also for my personal life.

**Contributors’ Account of Arthur Wright Combs’s Professional Legacy**

When asked his perspective of Combs’s most prominent contributions to counseling and psychology, one former colleague simply said, “Helping to humanize treatment.” This contributor elaborated on his experiences with Combs and his view of Combs’s global legacy by saying,

The theory. It’s the underlying perceptual psychological theory. In my mind, it provides the foundation upon which so many things good counselors have hit upon, thought about, done. But [before having knowledge of the theory] they never saw [counseling] as part of an overall, coherent body of understanding. 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.

Another psychologist explained the significance of Combs’s work in an historical context by saying that Combs gave psychology and counseling a new way of thinking about people that seemed to fit some huge void that was there from behaviorism and psychoanalytic thought. So this was the first time that people were thinking—along with Carl Rogers, of course—that what people perceive, how people perceive it, the meaning they prescribe to it, was central to understanding people. And if we’re going to be good helpers, we need to see it from a phenomenological point of view. Seeing the world through the person’s eyes without judgment.
His identification of effective helpers’ qualities was also cited as a significant component of his legacy. An educator of teachers asserted that

If I had to choose between somebody who had all these competencies as indicated in professional standards and somebody who had Combs’s traits for effective teacher-helpers [i.e., adequate personality, capacity for sharing self with others, and a capacity for disciplining oneself] the latter person is going to meet those standards anyway.

As my students recall their most significant teachers, the best teachers they had, [I ask them this question:] “Now, do you see them more clearly in the standards, or is it here, in the person?” [I then suggest] “If they are nowhere in the standards, then that’s on you. You are going to have to work and stretch yourself to become a better person, and then the rest will come. It will follow, I have faith in that.”

ARTHUR WRIGHT COMBS: CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

Combs’s career and life ended prior to the beginning of this century. Nonetheless his assertions and contributions the warrant attention of contemporary counselors and counselor educators. For example, the testimonies of protégés who contributed to this inquiry serve as an unambiguous reminder of the potential power inherent in interpersonal relationships and unconditional positive regard. Such endorsement invites contemporary counselors and educators to consider the ways in which they encounter students, supervisees, clients, family members, and friends with empowerment, especially in a rapidly changing technological society.

The research contributors provided a glimpse of the person of Combs, someone whose presence was empowering, whose teachings were enduring, whose influence continues long after his death. Can that level of human-to-human connection transcend screens and monitors? How can contemporary counselors who ascribe to humanistic principles draw from Combs’s research findings regarding effective helpers? Drawing from the previously cited words of a research contributor, “How can you better be able to share yourself? How can you better be opening yourself to experience? How can you be more accepting?”

As previously discussed, Combs was among the first to integrate humanistic beliefs with behavioral and cognitive approaches. His penchant for bridging disparate points of view provides a model for contemporary counselors who subscribe to humanistic principals and understand the importance of providing the best, most efficient assistance for clients. Such dialectical thinking and practice informs contemporary counselors who wish to bridge humanistic practice and evidence-based or manualized treatment protocols.

Replication of the extensive research addressing effective helpers would constitute a sound contribution to current practice and education. Findings of the original studies complement research supporting the common factor perspective, particularly relationship and hope factors (as reviewed by Ottens & Klein, 2005). Findings of a replicated inquiry may augment
understanding of those common factors. With consideration of both contemporary counselors-in-training and society, replication may inform selection and preparation of counselors and counselor educators, who will also become leaders of the profession.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Interpretative biographical documents must be examined within the context of the genre’s purposes, which pose both strengths and limitations. Certainly this portrayal of Combs is “incomplete, unfinished,” and influenced by my perspectives at the end of my professional career (Creswell, 2007, p. 226). The content, emphases, and interpretations were influenced by my regard for Combs, Carl Rogers, and other humanistic theorists. Additionally, the interview participants were restricted by my acquaintances and individuals provided through those acquaintances.

Combs was a prolific author, consummate educator, and astute counselor. He sought connection, reciprocity, and counsel from many of his friends. “As fathers go, he was certainly in the 99th percentile.” He concluded his career at UNC, where he was a distinguished professor. While there, he extended his theory as he collaborated with teacher education faculty and classroom teachers. He started and facilitated a men’s group, which continues to meet. The magnitude and endurance of his contributions to the professions of psychology, counseling, and education is unquestionable.

However, the enduring presence and influence perpetuated through his relationships with individuals may be the most profound aspect of his legacy. As previously mentioned, one protégé succinctly captured the enduring quality of Combs’s legacy and profound impact by saying, “I don’t think I could go through certainly a week of teaching, without thinking of Art in something.” Other contributors gently shared comments such as “he was just a very memorable and significant person to many of us,” and “He was probably the best friend I’ve had in my life.”

Combs lived his theory as an enduring pioneer who remained open to new experiences, invested himself in solid relationships, and embraced growth as he continued to examine and expand perceptual theory as well as himself as a person seeking fulfillment. These contributors have generously and candidly provided opportunities for others who did not experience his presence to vicariously experience the philosophy and example of Combs. I conclude with my hope that readers find relevance in that philosophy and example even in an era of rapid change, vast knowledge, and technological speed.

REFERENCES


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