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PERCEPTIONS AND CHOICE THEORY IN SCHOOLS AND COUNSELING

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Abstract

The way individuals perceive events and situations has been shown to be as important, often more important, than the events or situations themselves (Schiff, 1981). Often times, individuals are oblivious to the impact that internal factors such as past experiences and biases have on behaviors and choices. In turn, external factors, such as triggers in the environment, can result in reactions as opposed to responses. These reactions may have negative consequences, as there is minimal, or no thought involved. For counselors, these consequences can influence the progress and well-being of clients as well as the perceptions others hold of the counselor's competence (Henderson, Robey, Dunham & Dermer, 2013). William Glasser, creator of reality therapy and choice theory, also offers that a key factor in becoming an effective clinician is to understand one's own worldview and to utilize theories of counseling that are congruent with that worldview (Wubbolding, 2007). Going forward, this paper will explore what perceptions are, several examples of factors that influence them, and how they are addressed through Glasser's choice theory in both school and community counseling settings to foster more positive outcomes for clients.

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Introduction

Perception is awareness of the world around us (Schiff, 1981). Human beings are creatures of perception, able to receive input from the external world via the senses and organize it in ways that are usable and practical. No creatures of perception however, including human beings, ever truly experience objective reality, only subjective interpretations of it. A majority of the time, these subjective interpretations, although influenced by a plethora of factors, are adequate and accurate to the extent that we are able to successfully navigate through daily life without too much effort. At the same time, there are often subtle but deep-seated ideas that individuals obviously possess that can influence or even hijack what appears to be a 'chosen' response or action (Schiff, 1981).

Many factors that influence how we perceive the external world are tied to social norms and what we feel should happen based on what we know about previous similar experiences, also called conceptual knowledge (Collins, 2014). The tendency of human beings to fall victim to mental misinterpretations of sensory information often leads to misguided reactions until the mistake is realized and adjusted for (Milner, Wagner & Crouch, 2014).

William Glasser (1994) believed that we need not be victims who are oblivious to the impact that the past, the environment, and others have on our perceptions and behavior. He created *Choice Theory* and *Reality Therapy* to liberate clients to become more aware of the factors that influence their perceptions and therefore become better able to make choices that reflect their true wants, needs, and selves (Wubbolding, 2013). He felt that we are ultimately in charge of our choices and therefore can learn to more effectively tailor them in ways that are more conducive to personal and social success as well as to behaviors and actions that are more

congruent with our desires and personalities as opposed to reactive and unconscious ones catering to our assumptions, fears, memories, and other influences which may not be serving us well or moving us closer to fulfillment and our best selves.

Our internal perceptions influence our choices, which in turn, influence our actions and associated internal and external outcomes. Choice theory (Glasser, 1994) has and is being implemented in both schools and psychotherapy settings with the goal of empowering students and clients with the ability to be more conscious of their perceptions and make more informed choices congruent with who they are and what they need. Going forward, we will explore what perceptions are, examples of how they can be influenced (with or without our knowledge or consent), and how William Glasser's choice theory addresses the topic to provide clients and students with the power to rise above the influence to be their best and most genuine selves.

Review of Literature

What is Perception?

Perception has been defined as an awareness of the world, including its characteristics, objects, and events (Schiff, 1981). Most of what humans perceive first involves the acquisition of data or information through the senses/ sense organs. For example, we cannot perceive the color red unless we have first either viewed it with our visual sense organs (eyes) or perhaps heard a detailed description with our auditory sense organs (ears).

From this point forward, the perception of 'red' can exist without external stimuli, simply through memory recall. Still, the experience of 'red' can be different based on changes in the brain or the sense organs as well as through various arrangements or manipulations of the 'red' objects or stimuli being sensed (Schiff, 1981). Further separations between objective reality

(that which is sensed) and subjective reality (how we perceive or create meaning out of what has been sensed) are introduced as a result of personal biases, attitudes, and past experiences being automatically injected into the information being obtained. According to William Glasser (1994), we also, often unconsciously, project values of positivity or negativity onto simple data. For example, one individual may react positively to the color red, as it reminds him of a tasty apple, while another becomes anxious around it or simply “dislikes” it, as it reminds him of the blood witnessed after a traumatic accident. The color red is no different in either case, only the perception of it (Collins, 2014).

Perception then, is not solely a mechanical process beyond our reach. It is also a functional process that can be altered via intentional internal or external interventions. While some perceptions, such as simply identifying that someone is the age they are, are less permeable to influence (more based on objective data or facts), others, such as whether or not age impacts quality of life (quality being a *value* placed on the basic fact of being a certain age), are more vulnerable to influence and therefore more subjective and malleable from person to person based on what they’ve experienced, what they know, and what they *think* they know (Robertson, King-Kallimanis & Kenny, 2016).

Factors that Influence Perceptions

In terms of where factors that influence perceptions come from, all of them eventually reside within an individual’s mind. Initially, perceptions may be created or initiated by external events that the experiencer perceives as positive, negative, neutral, important, or unimportant. The impact (or lack thereof) that such events have on the experiencer may then serve as an

unconscious springboard of bias for how similar events are perceived in the future (Baker, 2010). Essentially, this unconscious bias is the internal influential factor of memory. A few other internal factors known to influence human perceptions are needs, desires, assumptions, socially groomed or hormonally influenced objectifications, and mood or attitude.

The fourth principle of William Glasser's choice theory (the others will be discussed later on) states that human being view the world through a perceptual system not unlike a camera with two lenses (Wubbolding, 2013). One of the lenses simply receives incoming information and accepts it neutrally as data. He calls this "low level perception". The other lens, however, not only receives the data, but places a value on that data. Values such as good, bad, desirable, undesirable, and thousands of others are, through this second lens, injected into an individual's perception of the previously neutral data. The role of perceptions here is to organize this external data or stimuli and prepare the individual for corresponding action (Wubbolding, 2013). The caveat, of course, is that this "higher level perception" is influenced by the factors mentioned in the previous paragraph. If acted upon unexamined, the corresponding beliefs and actions associated with these perceptions may not be congruent with what is best for the individual, best for others, or even reality itself!

A study by Taylor & Eves (2014) focused on how human needs influence how obstacles are perceived. This experiment involved 411 participants who were anticipating a climb up a long set of stairs. Prior to viewing the stairs, participants were given different consumable items of which the "energy content" was revealed. Following the consumption of the items, participants were to offer estimations of the stairs' steepness grade. Those who were given the "lower energy" items, on average, estimated the stairs to be significantly steeper than those who consumed the "higher energy" items. This experimental evidence suggests the visual system may

“rescale our conscious experience of steepness in line with available energy resources” (Taylor & Eves, 2014).

Memory, as mentioned earlier, is an unavoidable precursor to our perceptions of something familiar or, in even the most remote ways, related to something that is familiar. Two types of long-term memory play crucial roles in how we perceive what is in front of us. The first, declarative (otherwise coined ‘explicit’) memory, entails the retention of facts and events that can later be consciously recalled. The other, procedural (otherwise known as ‘implicit’) memory, involves the retention of “how” to carry out a task or activity, often unconsciously. Procedural memory is utilized on a daily basis (with the exceptions of those with severe brain damage or other neurological deficits) in tasks such as tying shoe laces or turning on a water faucet. These tasks are carried out much more efficiently without the need to consciously retrieve the information required to carry them out (Hooper & Teresi, 1986).

A study in the Netherlands (Holger et al, 2009) focused on how, and to what degree, declarative memory mediates how world knowledge influences what we perceive. To accomplish this, Dutch and German participants were gathered and given a battery of color/hue identification exercises. Participants were to decide whether the hue presented was yellow or orange.

When discriminating an ambiguous hue, both the German and Dutch participants tended to deem it yellow, attributed to the majority of hues presented being “objectively yellow” (Holger et al, 2009). However, when shown the exact same example of a stoplight, Dutch observers labeled the center light as ‘orange’, while their German counterparts overwhelmingly referred to the color as ‘yellow’. According to Holger et al (2009), the reason for the departure from previous agreement between the groups lies within declarative memory.

When presented with a familiar object (the stoplight), each group had to consciously associate a 'name' to the color of the center light. When both groups identified the colors closest to the hues they were presented via splotches, they were looking at a color with no familiar context clues to influence the 'name' given to it. While both groups likely saw the same 'objective' color in the center bulb of the stoplight, the retrieval of that color from memory, in this specific context, was pulled through a filter of regional colloquialisms resulting in the 'name' offered by each group to be influenced.

A result of memory and experience is the assumption, and it too is based on past experiences that, when left unexamined, can significantly influence the "choices" individuals make throughout the day. Assumptions are basically concepts or ideas that often go unnoticed in the moment, yet underlie the things we do and the actions we take. While some consider assumptions a dangerous hindrance, the author of the article *Viewpoint: Assumptions* (2011) argues that they are necessary for purposeful action (Gallop, 2011). In addition, assumptions, according to Gallop, can actually be the catalyst *or* deterrent to taking action, as memories of outcomes in similar past situations are often unconsciously injected into the decision-making process.

According to Stambolis & Saguy (2014), semantics plays a role in our perceptions of the meaning behind the written or vocalized word, as we widely depend upon language to communicate. In some cases, cultural diffusion has occurred, lessening the influence of semantics despite geographical distances and language barriers. In other cases, different cultures may even use the same phrases to mean different things, thus creating confusion or faulty perceptions/assumptions of meaning and intention from one to the other. Misunderstandings in these cases can impact one individual's perceptions of another culture, which can lead to

distorted thoughts and attitudes toward multicultural interpersonal relationships and ultimately, a change in outward choices and behavior that follow suit (Stambolis & Saguy, 2014). Later on, we will discuss how cultural biases and other culture-related factors can also impact counseling relationships/dyads and the therapeutic alliance via transference and counter-transference. .

Affect/attitude is yet another filter that incoming information must penetrate before we consciously acknowledge it. Not only does attitude affect an individual's perceptions, it also influences the internal self-talk that, in turn, influences and reinforces a given perception. Ian Burkitt (2013) produced a research-based article that focused on the role that "microdialogue" (self-talk) plays in how we perceive what we sense. His contention is that such microdialogue can never truly be emotionally neutral, as it is inherently based on previous experiences and outcomes that were significant enough to leave an impression which is later unconsciously recalled in relatable circumstances (Burkitt, 2013).

What we unconsciously recall and inject into our perceptions is a result of what once was a survival mechanism. Not much different than the fundamentals of fight or flight, we often unconsciously determine the safety, usefulness, and value of an object or event prior to getting the whole story. Such assumptions can be useful, while others can lead to perceptions that are incongruent with objective reality (Gallop, 2011). One phenomenon directly associated with this is that of objectification.

According to several models of objectification (Gray et al, 2011), when one individual views another only as a body, it results in the dementalization (little to no focus on the individual's intelligence or mind) of the person being viewed and strips away his or her psychological traits. Recent studies by Gray, Knobe, Sheskin, Bloom, & Barrett (2011) revealed

a slightly different discovery. They found that when an individual views another simply as a body, the observer perceives the observed to possess a different kind of mind altogether; one that is less capable with less agency (self-control and action) but higher in emotional and sensational experience. In addition, individuals observed with a body focus were perceived as less morally responsible, more emotionally vulnerable, and more sensitive to harm.

Often, when hearing the word ‘objectification’, the thought of sexual objectification of women is the first one to manifest. When considering the information presented by Gray et al (2011), it is not surprising that people, namely “attractive” women, are regularly objectified. While there are some unconscious, internal factors involved in this phenomenon, there are also external factors that nurture and perpetuate it. One such factor is the media. Another is the value that a given society places on appearance and to what degree this impacts the belief systems of individuals, their self-worth (via comparison to such standards), and ultimately, their choice to strive for such standards themselves (Gray et al, 2011).

Another study of 440 men and women by Swami, Stieger, Pietching, & Voracek (2012), found that when presented with male and female models as stimuli, a majority of participants rated the attractiveness and intelligence of these models as lower if they possessed facial piercings and/or tattoos. On the flip side of the objectification phenomena previously mentioned, the piercings and tattoos had a larger impact on the participants’ view of the male models’ inner and outer qualities (Swami, Stieger, Pietching, & Voracek, 2012). Although the models presented with more facial tattoos and piercings were generally viewed as less intelligent and attractive, a small percentage of participants viewed them as neutral or positive. Those participants for whom the piercings and tattoos had a less negative impact or a *positive* impact

either had body modifications themselves, or more often, reported higher levels of openness and sensation-seeking.

Research such as what has been presented thus far can be of concern when it seems to undermine the hope that we are capable, thoughtful creatures with the ability to take charge of how we think and act. While some individuals seem able to identify their biases, cognitive distortions, and how outside influences impact their choices, others feel as if their thoughts and behaviors are at the mercy of forces of which they can have no knowledge of or control over. While there is no way to have complete control of these (Burkitt, 2013), several individuals and practitioners have learned that there are indeed ways to *increase* our control and that these ways can also be taught. The next section will highlight some of these methods, particularly William Glasser's *Choice Theory*.

Incorporating Perceptions and Choice Theory into Counseling

So many factors influence our perceptions, many of them at a subconscious level. William Glasser believed that despite the often seemingly unconscious manifestations of these influences, we need not be slaves to them. He believed that despite being influenced by our environments and past relationships/ experiences, we need not be victims to these forces that are ultimately out of our control. He proposed that we can use our “internal controls” in an intentional way, essentially choosing our behaviors and actions despite the inevitable pull and pressure of influences past and present, conscious and unconscious (Wubbolding, 2015).

As reported by William Howatt (2001), In the early 1960s, William Glasser decided to take a detour from the current trends in psychotherapy. By 1972, he had adapted what was first

coined *control theory*. This provided a frame of reference for practitioners to apply reality therapy. A little over a decade later, Glasser decided it would be appropriate to change the name to *choice theory* in order to more accurately reflect its fundamental idea; that people have choices (Howatt, 2001).

Choice theory serves as the theoretical basis for the practice of reality therapy. Choice theory, when implemented into counseling, is described by Glasser as a system created to liberate clients and help them make beneficial but realistic choices within the parameters of their limitations (Wubbolding, 2015). Accompanying this purpose is the notion that it is not necessarily the events we encounter that create our well-being or lack thereof, but how we react or respond. As Glasser himself believed, acknowledging this notion is just the first step for clients in their quest to regain a healthy worldview, increased optimism, and higher degree of control in their lives (Evans, 1982).

One of the factors that effective counselors look for is clients' microdialogue or "self-talk". Burkitt (2013) argues that perceptions cannot be emotionally neutral because it is so heavily influenced by the emotional-evaluative stances and conflicting voices that can divide an individual. He goes on to add that an individual's point of view on the world and himself, along with their microdialogue, is the place from which they assess reality and subsequently take a given action. (Burkitt, 2013).

Microdialogue certainly serves as an in the moment, play by play color commentator on the meaning behind interpersonal exchanges and can continuously reinforce notions within an individual's mind that have been carried into a given situation from previous experiences and other factors outside of that present moment. For many day to day activities and decisions, this is

a luxury that allows for more fluidity, decisiveness, and effortless action (Burkitt, 2013). In other ways, this unconscious injection of the past into the present can manifest into protective, tentative, and defensive feeling and projections. One such way this can surface in counseling is via transference or countertransference (Srour, 2015).

Srour (2015) focused on the dynamic of long-term therapy between counselors and clients whose cultural affiliations are deemed as conflicting, or as in the specific case of the Palestinian counselor/ Jewish client dynamic, enemies. The argument from Srour (2015) is that the therapist must be able to process his own feelings of threat, anger, guilt, and others effectively if he is to appropriately and effectively hear and, in a healthy, non-malificent manner, help explore the client's internal feelings and struggles associated with his own feelings and attitudes toward the same political/cultural climate (but through what could perhaps be a lens that views it in ways that oppose the cultural/political norms of the counselor's national affiliation).

Choice theory/reality therapy approaches the transference/countertransference issue by following the projection back to the more universal root of basic human wants and needs. Dr. Michael Wubbolding (2015), a staunch supporter of further implementation of Glasser's choice theory into both schools and counseling, highlights that this innate adherence to viewing choices as the result of each individual's quest to satisfy basic wants and needs within their given environments and parameters of limitation makes it particularly effective from a multicultural standpoint.

The implementation of choice theory via reality therapy seeks to help clients meet their psychological needs for belonging, power, freedom, and fun in ways that are satisfying and responsible (Sharf, 2012). When creating reality therapy, Glasser sought to move away from the

more traditional Freudian exploration of unconscious motivation, instead focusing on helping clients determine how well their needs are being met, how realistic their wants are, and whether or not their choices and resulting behaviors are serving them in realizing their wants and needs. This is often pursued by assessing what a client is *doing*, how the client is *thinking* about their situation, the *feelings* that accompany these, and the *physiological* states that result. Reality therapists, when assessing these four domains, call this assessing “total behaviors” (Sharf, 2012).

Perceptions and Choice Theory in Schools

Perceptions do not cease to influence when a student (or staff) enters the school setting. Additionally, many students have different learning styles and unique perspectives of classroom dynamics (Zeeman, 2006). As time has passed, more attention is being paid to social and emotional aspects of a student’s world as well as how those aspects interact with and affect academic performance. As reported by Berg & Aber (2015), a study of 4,016 4th graders from 83 different public elementary schools found that the interpersonal school climate was the only factor (among the factors being observed) that was universally (in terms of gender and race) indicative of both academic and social-emotional well-being.

William Glasser echoed the importance of interpersonal relationships and believed that the fundamentals of Choice Theory, if applied to the school setting, could significantly improve the quality of the school in which it was implemented. His ideas of what would improve school climate and overall performance, in large part, were built upon a fundamental idea that students are most effective when in an environment that does not suggest to them that they are inherently victims of the world around them, but rather that their behavior and related outcomes begin

within them and what avenues they choose to pursue (Wubbolding, 2015). Essentially, when students' individual personalities and freedom of choice are valued, they feel more empowered, supported, and accepted as opposed to pressured, incapable, and misunderstood.

To achieve this, Glasser suggested that school leaders should reduce or altogether get rid of what he deemed the "seven deadly habits". These habits are criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, bribing, or rewarding in order to gain control. He labeled these "deadly habits" as toxic and recommended "tonics" to replace them which in turn would also foster more healthy interpersonal relationships as well as exercise the students' abilities to make choices congruent with these relationships while feeling valued as individuals as well. These "tonics" or caring habits, are supporting, listening, encouraging, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences (Wubbolding, 2015).

Glasser believed that students are at their best when the conditions surrounding them allow for positive interpersonal relationships between student and student, student and teacher, student and administration, and teacher/administration and parent (Glasser, 1994). This begins with a philosophy of leadership that "leads" as opposed to "bosses", taking into account basic human wants and needs, individual differences, relationships, and how the perceptions and choices involved in each of these facets interplay.

In a 2012 article titled *Glasser Quality Schools*, William Wubbolding highlights how Glasser sought to adapt the school setting, using four principles of choice theory, to be more conducive to increasing academic achievement, lower disciplinary incidents, and improve student enjoyment (Wubbolding, 2007). Below are these four principles and some of the logic behind them:

1. Human motivation is internal and based on each individual's perceptions of and responses to five basic human needs of belonging, power/inner control, freedom or independence, fun or enjoyment, and for survival or self-preservation.
2. When people feel that they have what they want and need, they have a sense of homeostasis or balance. The lack of this sense of fulfillment leads to choices based around acquiring it.
3. Action, thinking, feeling, and physiology create "total behavior" (Glasser, 1994), the most controllable of the four being action. Actions/behavior and their precursors, choices, are purposeful; that purpose being to satisfy human wants and needs.
4. Human beings view the world through a perceptual system similar to a camera with two lenses; one lens simply acquiring data without bias (low-level perception), the other projecting "value" onto the data (high-level perception). In schools, an example of low-level perception would be simple viewing a student as a "student", while high-level perception adds values or qualities to how the teacher views the student, such as "bright", or "trouble-maker (Wubbolding, 2007).

With these principles understood and implemented, districts can create what William Glasser called a "Quality School" and what Wubbolding specifically coins a "Glasser Quality School" (Wubbolding, 2007).

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have examined what perceptions are, factors that influence them, how perceptions influence our choices, and how a firm grasp of these phenomena can

empower counselors and school faculty to better educate, assist, and in turn, empower their clients and students.

Results of studies related to how individuals perceive the intelligence, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and abilities of others (Gray et al, 2011) based on superficial factors such as size, style, body modifications (Swami, Stieger, Pietrich,& Voracek, 2012) , and skin color are important for counselors, both in community and school settings, to be aware of, for if present but unaccounted for in a counseling relationship, they can thwart attempts at creating a therapeutic alliance and inhibit client openness, trust, and progress before a word is spoken. Transference and countertransference are rather typical occurrences in counseling (Srour, 2015) and it is up to the professional counselor (especially in the context of beneficence for the client) to be aware of the possibility, identify signs of their presence, and gently, respectfully, and openly explore them with the client if their influence is apparently unhealthy, maladaptive, or otherwise negatively pervasive.

Through this lens, an effective counselor can see that, despite significant cultural differences and despite the probability that each may look like the other's enemy on the surface, beneath lies a common core that faces similar basic struggles. It is here that a multiculturally competent counselor can choose to suspend judgment, sit with his client, learn about his client, and begin to cultivate a therapeutic alliance across cultural lines (Srour, 2015).

Choice theory lends itself to the inclusion of the multicultural considerations previously mentioned. In addition, whether implemented in classrooms, school counseling, or community counseling, choice theory promotes being true to our universal human needs, honoring individual

differences, and creating positive interpersonal and therapeutic relationships that foster accountability, understanding, freedom, and growth.

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Tables/Figures/Appendix A (if needed)

This is where you would include any materials you developed or adapted from other sources, graphs, tables, etc. You must refer to the specific appendix section somewhere in the text of your paper making sure to match your reference with the appropriate appendix section at the back of your paper (e.g. Appendix A, Appendix B, etc.). Each new appendix section begins with a title page showing the appendix section (e.g. Appendix A) and a title for the material that follows.