

**Constructed and Natural Consequences:
Perceptions of a Sister and A Teen
CMU Writer**

I was sitting in a cafe with bright pink walls, listening to loud techno music and scribbling notes in my day planner. When my mobile phone started ringing, I assumed it was the friend who was supposed to meet me there in a few minutes. Instead, it was my little sister.

“I got good news and bad news,” she said. “And you can’t tell mom either one.”

“OK, OK,” I said. She’d crashed her car, she went on to tell me, while driving home “super-drunk” from a great party at the university an hour away from home. She’d already called her insurance company and fed them some line—which they apparently swallowed in its entirety—about the supposedly legitimate circumstances that caused her to run off the road. She sounded almost excited. My stomach turned over.

“But are you OK?” I asked. How many inches, how many seconds, away from instant death had she been when the airbag inflated? You could have been killed, I wanted to scream. You could have killed somebody else. You could have ended up spending the rest of your life on a ventilator, or in a wheelchair. At the very least, you could have lost your license.

But she was always deciding to take stupid risks like that, I thought. Maybe now that she’d had a brush with real danger, with serious consequences, she’d weigh her options a little differently.

“Thank goodness you’re all right,” I said.

“Yeah, mom and dad have no idea,” she said. “It’s all good—they’ll never know. Anyway, I gotta run. Give me a call when you’re gonna be in town, maybe we can party or something.”

I was speechless. I wanted to scream, but I was in a crowded cafe and my friend had just sat down and ordered a drink. Here my little sister had put herself in a ridiculously dangerous situation and had been fortunate enough to walk away unhurt—and all she could think about was whether or not she would get in trouble with our parents.

She has no idea about consequences, I thought as I chatted about the music and decor with my friend. But then, I had to ask, who am I to talk about consequences? I was miles away from the world where our mother could take away my telephone or forbid me to go out on a Friday night.

My sister had never had any reason to see beyond the world or the consequences constructed by parents and teachers to ‘protect’ and instruct her. When I looked at the situation she described—a “super-drunk” teenager running her car into a ditch—the worst-case scenario that came to mind involved gruesome death: hers or someone else’s. But I was sitting far away in a bright pink cafe; she was sitting on the floor of the pale pink bedroom she’d slept in for 18 years. In her mind, the worst-case scenario was ‘mom might find out.’

Until this phone call, I’d never thought much about how our perception of consequences affects our decision-making. Of course I’d realized that we tend to make better decisions after considering ‘the consequences’—heaven knows I’d made plenty of pro/con lists about everything from colleges to relationships to hair colors and dessert options. But it had never occurred to me that not all consequences come from the same place, that any of us who live in a civilized society face two sets of consequences for every action: the ‘real’ natural consequences doled out by nature or circumstance (such as the gruesome death or injury I had imagined), and the constructed consequences—the punishments or rewards—doled out by authority figures (such as speeding tickets or DUI citations). The world of perceived consequence is even more complicated for teens, who have to maneuver not only through natural consequences and socially constructed consequences, but also through the additional set of consequences constructed by their parents.

I’d also never considered, specifically, how our society’s verdict about a teen’s decision-making ability hinges so much on which set of consequences the teen chooses to prioritize. We often criticize those so-called ‘immature’ teens who focus on avoiding constructed punishment; we say they are too young to understand the ‘real’ consequences of their actions. At the same time, we rotely punish those who disregard constructed consequences and chose to place a higher value on the natural consequences that often involve personal values and beliefs. In theory, we applaud personal conviction and strong value systems, but in practice it hardly matters which set of consequences it is appropriate for a teen to consider in each situation; it often only matters which set of consequences aligns most closely with the world-view of the authority figure who is determining whether the teen made a ‘good’ decision.

My initial criticism and dismissal of my sister’s perception of consequences, then, evolved to curiosity as I gradually acknowledged the validity of her perspective. I realized that I would face

some strong disagreement if I tried to tell her that the harsh punishment (and subsequent lack of respect) she would probably have faced at home was not a ‘real’ consequence. Her perception of consequences was as valid as mine was (if not more so, as she was the one actually in the situation), I realized, but because our perceptions did not align, I had rushed to condemn her decision-making as immature and her perceptions as distorted. I started to wonder, how often does this happen? How often do we dismiss the decision-making power of younger people because we ourselves fail to perceive what I now know to call their ‘story behind the story,’ their entirely valid reasons and motivations for making the choices they do? And how do these perceptions of consequences develop?

These questions are too broad to answer with any degree of truth in just one inquiry. They are too complex to be informed by only a few sets of experience. They are too general to produce an easily-interpreted data set. They do, however, provide an interesting place to begin exploring more specific questions as they relate to the lives of specific teenagers navigating specific sets of consequences—both natural and constructed—on a daily basis. When I learned that we would have an opportunity this semester to spend time with teenagers talking and writing about decisions they make, I hoped they would help me learn more about how perception of both natural and constructed consequences function for different teens in different circumstances. The exigency for this inquiry is rooted not only in its relevance to education and outreach initiatives directed to youth (such as health-awareness and violence or drug-use prevention programs) but also in its recognition of the complex struggles and decision-making achievements that lead teens to choices that adult authority figures too often dismiss as “not well thought-out.”

When Richard first shared decisions he had made, he told a story about skipping out of school for a few minutes and not being allowed back in. As the Journey Book project progressed, scholars again and again shared stories about their decisions to skip class. Because the teens we worked with felt that this was such a significant issue in their lives, I think it is an appropriate one in which to ground this discussion of perceived consequences.

The teens we spoke with shared stories that showed how authority figures in their lives – teachers, parents, vice principals—perceived the decision to skip school as one primarily influenced by a lack of respect for rules and authority, or a failure to value the educational opportunities available to them through the SOS program. Listening to the story behind the

story, though, shows that these teens sometimes chose to skip school not because they lack respect for rules (and certainly not because they fail to value the educational opportunities available through SOS, as they so clearly articulated), but because their perception of consequences focuses not on constructed consequences (such as punishment or falling out of favor with authority) but on natural consequences such as what they would be able to do with the extra time vs. what they would do in school. In a number of these stories, teens said the classes they were choosing to skip were boring, reductive, and even insulting. (This was particularly apparent in their discussion of classes with the ‘LD’ label outside the SOS program.) Skipping school, they said, allowed them to do one of two things: spend time with friends or avoid unpleasant (that is, boring or embarrassing) classroom experiences. Such a decision, from this point of view, involves not a disrespect for authority but a devotion to a set of values not always perceived or recognized by those in power.

For example, Joe discussed a decision to skip out of camp for the afternoon because the camp activities made him feel bored and counselors didn’t listen to his requests for alternate activities. When we talked about what he would do differently in the future, he said in all seriousness that he would remember to bring a map and food because that way nobody would get seriously hurt. He was not concerned with avoiding punishment – just avoiding actual danger. The artificial consequence of being scolded at camp did not seem like a dire deterrent when compared to the realities of being bored or getting lost and hurt. When faced with this decision, a teen who is worried about ‘real’ consequences might skip camp and bring a map along on the hike; a teen worried about constructed consequences might stay put and stay bored in order to avoid being scolded or punished.

Richard, on the other hand, shared a story in which he repeatedly referenced the consequences and punishments that could be doled out by those in power. When I asked him what decisions he had made lately, he said “I got in trouble on Friday,” and we went from there. He told the story of how he had left school for a few minutes between classes to check out the new paint job on his friend’s car. Richard is interested in and knowledgeable about cars; they are important in his family life and play a significant part in his future plans. His friend was about to leave for work, so this was his last chance to see the newly painted car until late Monday. He chose to leave the school building to look at the car. When he tried to re-enter the school to get to class, he found that he was locked out and that his teacher would not open the door to let him in. He continued

to tell the story of what decisions he made to deal with this situation. At each of the decision points in his story, Richard referenced his concerns about getting in trouble with his parents or his teachers. When reflecting on why his teacher may have acted the way he did (by not opening the door), Richard considered his teacher's role in enforcing rules and punishments, and also considered his teacher's role as someone who might be punished by his own boss for breaking the rules.

On another occasion, Richard explained what the idea of consequences meant to him. He started by telling me about an ancient civilization in which petty thieves were punished by having their hands cut off. He took this concept and showed me how it manifests itself in today's culture: with strict speeding tickets and harsh economic punishments for breaking rules at work, with insurance companies, and with government agencies.

These two teenagers helped me understand the vastly different ways individuals can approach similar decisions based on the kind of consequence they value. In this inquiry, I am interested not in finding out why these values developed but in further exploring the ways that these different perceptions function in the daily and long-term decision-making of SOS scholars. The teens we worked with have shared their insights about different times and ways they have considered or valued each type of consequence: natural and constructed. Critical theory about literacy helped me to understand their experiences in the context of on-going debate about learning and indoctrination, the values inherent in discourse communities, and the relationship of agency to literacy and narrative.

Walter Ong argues that literacy—specifically, the act of turning experience into a written product—shapes thinking in that it promotes 'objectivity' and creates the many types of distance necessary for true reflection. It "narrativizes experience and the environment," he says. Were he to sit down at a table with some SOS scholars to discuss the ways teens with learning disabilities perceive consequences, Ong might propose that the ability to perceive constructed consequences— especially to simultaneously perceive two types of constructed consequences, as in those constructed by parents and those constructed by social enforcers such as police—is a characteristically literate activity because it involves a level of mentally separating the actual event and its natural consequences from its potential social consequences.

Ong might argue that non-literate societies had less abstract and more literal punishment systems because it was important for them to closely link the constructed consequence (such as cutting off a hand) as closely and as viscerally as possible to the original action in order to make it closely imitate natural consequences, which he might say it requires less reflection to perceive. Many urban teens, Ong might argue, have grown up in environments in which they have been forced to place a premium on perception of natural consequences (such as personal safety) for the sake of survival; the ability to shift out of this mode and know when it is appropriate or safe to focus on constructed consequences, then, represents an even more remarkable achievement of literacy. As such, it is only fitting that the place where significant amounts of formal literacy are acquired— school—is also the place where a focus on constructed consequences is widely perceived to be appropriate. Ong’s ideas let us see scholars as engaging in very literate reflective practices every time they consider the constructed consequences of their decisions.

A teacher speaking back to Ong, on the other hand, might argue that many American teens live their first 18 years with very little contact with the ‘real’ consequences of their decision, in part because they are shielded by their parents, by teachers, and by the law from having the ability to make many 'real' decisions with immediate consequences. For such teens, one might argue, the constructed consequences of parental and academic reprimand might seem more real than natural consequences that are in fact outside their range of experience.

Paulo Friere, then, might speak up to voice the idea that it is time we as a society begin to break down the constructed consequences that can falsely weight decision-making; too much of literacy, too much of education, and too much of our life together as civilized people, he might argue, is governed by the very separation and distance that Ong lauds as a positive product of literacy. This distance and separation from reality, Friere might argue, only serves to reinforce the hierarchies of power and authority that perpetuate the oppression of certain groups of people. By breaking down these constructs, we could perhaps forge a more equal and harmonious society. Teens who perceive natural consequences, he might argue, are on the right path; the rest of us, especially educators who too infrequently address the realities of students’ lives, need to learn from their perception of consequences. As such, it is important for teens to use literacy for their own purposes, especially to record their stories and to see themselves as creators and conduits of unique and valuable culture.

Brian Street might expand on one aspect of Friere's argument by noting that in the United States today, the groups often oppressed by hierarchical power structures are those who can be called—accurately or not— 'less literate' than average. Teens living with a label of 'learning disabled' certainly fit into the category of those who are stereotyped (often inaccurately, as the SOS scholars so elegantly and effectively prove) as being less literate than their peers. Literacy, Street argues, "represents a way of perpetuating the notion of a 'great divide'. . . that is less acceptable when expressed in other terms." Street might point out that it is important for teens with an 'L.D.' label to consider and acknowledge the power structures around them, and to be aware that those invested in the power structures might hold inaccurate stereotypes of them that will only be reinforced if they chose to act on their perception of natural rather than constructed consequences. I don't believe that Street would argue that teens should bow to the power structures and base their decisions solely on the consequences constructed by others, but I think he would urge teens to take the consequence-perception to an even more meta level by considering the consequences of how they chose to perceive consequences: paying attention to those rewards/punishments constructed by authority figures leads to praise and acceptance from the powers that be, while focusing on the natural consequences of a decision may lead to continued exclusion by those who find labels about learning and literacy to be safe ways to exclude others from power.

David Bartholomae might then chime in to the discussion with ideas about how individuals become indoctrinated with a way of doing something, how they learn to participate adeptly in a system that is not familiar to them. "They must learn to speak our language," he says, "or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff." They "must imagine for themselves the privilege of being 'insiders.'" Bartholomae might discuss the awkwardness that can come with the early stages of acclimatizing to a new discourse, to trying out a new 'language' and learning its commonplaces through experience and apprenticeship rather than through clear-cut explanation or rote learning.

This is where I hear many scholars saying they find themselves right now. Many of them describe a home environment filled with violence that forces them to live day-to-day with an eye on the natural consequences of every decision. Others describe lives that have at times involved feelings of exclusion based on their label of 'learning disabled.' But, as they speak of their experiences such as mentorships and jobs through the SOS program, they talk about being accepted into the

same establishments of power that some have used labels to exclude them from. As they make this gradual transition to life as an ‘insider’ in a complex hierarchy of authority, they talk about switching between modes of perception. It might be appropriate to consider natural consequences when you are working on a car, Richard explained, because otherwise you could be seriously hurt. But at work, he described, it is especially important to consider the possible punishments and constructed consequences of making mistakes or miscommunicating with clients.

Any such transition between worlds, as Bartholomae might say, is bound to be an awkward and gradual one. There is no easy or magical way to learn immediately what perceptions are most appropriate in each and every situation. But the scholars who informed this inquiry demonstrated again and again how they effectively employ different modes of perception in different circumstances and to different ends; their ability to do so shows that they not only make reflective decisions, but that they in effect make decisions based on decisions about what type of reflection is most appropriate in each circumstance. Their ability to perceive natural and constructed consequences testifies to the often-hidden agency these teens exercise in navigating decision-making challenges on a daily basis. Recognizing this agency and acknowledging the validity of the choices it produces can contribute to a climate of respect, respect for all varieties of thoughtful decisions and for the teens who make them.

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Decision-Making Inquiry

Community Literacy and Intercultural Interpretation