TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS

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Abstract: The status of any given discipline, be it professional status or impact on society, is related to the occupational opportunities and the roles of the professionals in the community. The roles of the professionals of the discipline therefore can directly or indirectly determine the social perception of the discipline. As such, social perception, referring to how people of a given society receive and value a situation, behaviour, state of mind, or profession is a critical focus in this study because it helps us better understand the relationship between contributions of a discipline to the welfare of the society and the values that a society attaches to the contributions of that discipline. The discipline of study in this paper is psychology and how it is perceived in a newly industrialised country. In this paper, 121 teachers’ perceptions of the psychologists’ occupational roles are examined. Teachers perceived psychologists to be professionals working with counselling cum helping services, higher education and research institutions and business cum social sector. Implications of the study for the role of psychology in teacher education are discussed.

Introduction

Psychology, a newly emerged scientific discipline in the late nineties and a new academic discipline in Singapore, has in the past two decades attracted attention of the public. The professional status of psychology and psychologists in Singapore, and perhaps much of Asia at large, is still at its early stage of development compared to their Euro-American counterparts. In 1979, the Singapore Psychological Society was established. Several years later, in the academic year 1986/1987, the Faculty of Social Work and Psychology of the National University of Singapore (NUS) offered a bachelor’s degree program in psychology. Ten years later, the National Institute of Education (NIE) established a Master of Arts in Applied Psychology program with emphases in educational psychology and counselling psychology. Starting with 31 students in 1997, the Master’s program at NIE has maintained an average intake of 30 candidates in 1998 and 1999. In 1998, the NUS introduced its Master’s program in psychology.

The status and, hence, progress of a discipline is related to its professional status and its impact on society and people. It is also related to the occupational opportunities and the roles professionals play in the community. As a matter of fact, the usefulness of a discipline determines the status and hence the social perception of a discipline in the society. The roles of the professionals of a discipline shape the social perception of the discipline. Social perception refers to ways people of a society receive and value a situation, behaviour, state of mind, or profession. It is a collective view of individuals in a society, and thus has a substantial influence on the social status and future direction of any given discipline. A mutual relationship exists between the contributions of a discipline to the welfare of a society and values that a society attaches to the contributions of a discipline. To enable a discipline to develop and progress, people of a society must acknowledge the impact that discipline has on their well-being and place socio-economic and cultural values on it. Occupational roles of psychologists thus have to be distinct and convincing so that psychology can be viewed as a valuable, if not indispensable, discipline in a society.
There are two ways to examine the status of a discipline. One direct way is to study the statistics that reflect the occupations of graduates of a discipline. For example, the socio-economic values (e.g., incomes) of a discipline are reflected in the professional qualifications, and types of occupations of its graduates. Another way is to study social perception of the socio-economic value (e.g., workplaces), educational value (e.g., how much one can learn from the discipline), and cultural value (e.g., the relation between the discipline and the well being of the people) of a discipline. The former method enables us to know the actual occupational situations and thus the socio-economic status (e.g., incomes) of a profession. The latter method provides us with the perceived socio-cultural status of the profession. The perceived socio-cultural status of a profession is as important as the socio-economic status of a discipline as both are indicators of the usefulness of a discipline in a society. Regardless of which method, professionals, experts, lawmakers, and common people place their support, or non-support, of a discipline based on data, knowledge, perception as well as misperception, and hence, directly affect the progress of a discipline.

In examining, the “direct” way, the actual occupations of Singapore’s psychologists registered with the Singapore Psychological Society (SPS) according to the 1997/98 membership data (analysed by the second author), the total number of members of the Singapore Psychological Society was 119, of which 16% worked at health institutes and hospitals, 14.3% worked with educational services, and 7% were associated with the public service. Such data, although seemingly “factual”, needs to be qualified as being limited as with most self-reported data. For instance, forty percent of the members did not indicate their place of employment. Considering the NIE as an example, less than a handful of faculty members registered as members of the Singapore Psychological Society (four out of 22 faculty members of the Psychological Studies Division, as of August 1999). This can partly be explained by alternative associations like the Singapore Counselling Association and the Educational Research Association that some faculty as well as psychological practitioners in the community feel more closely affiliated with. Sometimes, the explanation is as simple as one of convenience or financial choice (i.e. cost of dues). There was also a time when SPS required members to have a Bachelor’s degree in psychology even though an individual’s postgraduate degrees, including doctorates, may be in psychology. More importantly, as pertains to this study, such disassociation contributes to the general public’s social perception, or lack thereof, of the role of psychologists in Singapore. The former “indirect” way does motivate a separate position paper on the need to address a certain apathy in the profession.

This study, however, submits that studying the social perception of a discipline, while seemingly “indirect” when compared with census data, is a more appropriate and meaningful starting point. The fundamental premise for this study is this: that while it is easy to study how many psychologists there are, where they work, and even what they do, the applied nature of psychology in a developing nation begs the question “why the need for psychology?” That is, do we understand a culture’s perception of a new discipline, it’s role and it’s utility? The answers to such questions may provide clearer insights as to potential difficulties, need for adaptation, and foresee resistance to when psychology may clash with cultural or societal nuances. Such answers may in fact illuminate problems that arose earlier with the “direct” data.

Singapore is currently most familiar with the applied aspect of psychology called counselling. While the idea of helping other human beings has long existed in the social fabric of many cultures, the form in which helping takes place varies (Goh, 1992). Saeki and Borow (1985) highlight the fact that differences in the way counselling is practiced in the East and West stem from basic differences in the historical and philosophical perspectives of cultures which, in turn, influence the different ends in counselling objectives. In introducing counselling psychology from Western cultures, it is important to note and understand informal helping systems (Brammer, 1978), natural support systems (Pearson, 1985), and indigenous models of helping (Das, 1987; Lee, Oh, and
Mountcastle, 1992) that already exist within societies. This study will therefore attempt to enhance our understanding in these areas.

The focus on “perception” is also deliberate because the literature on help-seeking suggests that perception of problem (Mau and Jepsen, 1990) as well as perception of counselling or psychologists as a source of help (Manese, Sedlacek, and Leong, 1988) contribute to our understanding of how persons unfamiliar with psychology face certain barriers when considering helping services. Other studies that imply different perception of psychologists or helping services have also suggested that in opposition to formal psychological services, informal helping systems not only exist for persons in different cultures but that such sources of help are, in fact, preferred (Goh, 1995; Leong & Sedlacek, 1986; Christensen & Magoon, 1974). Studies by Kim (1992), Exum and Lau (1988), and Mau and Jepsen (1988) also highlight how perception of helping approach, helper credibility, and helper style respectively contribute to the efficacy of various sources of help. In this study, the authors will maintain a simple focus on Singaporean perceptions of the workplaces of psychologists in order to explore other possible domains for further study. Five research questions are formulated as follows:

- How do Singaporeans perceive the workplaces of psychologists?
- Are there gender differences in Singaporeans’ perception of psychologists’ workplaces?
- Do Singaporeans who attended and who did not attend psychology courses perceive psychologists’ workplaces differently?
- Do Singaporeans who read and who did not read books on psychology perceive psychologists’ workplaces differently?
- Do science and engineering graduates perceive psychologists’ workplaces differently from their social science counterparts?

Method

Subjects

A total of 121 subjects (97, 80.2% female; 24, 19.8% male) participated in a paper-and-pencil survey. Of the total, 55 (45.5%) were between 20 and 24 years old, 40 (33.1%) between 25 and 29, 18 (14.9%) were between 30 and 34, and 8 (6.6%) were 35 years and above. All of them graduated with a bachelor degree, 24 (19.9%) in science and engineering and 95 (78.5%) in social sciences. About one third (39, 32.2%) attended psychology courses and half of them (70, 57.9%) claimed that they have read books on psychology.

Instrument

The instrument comprised a list of twenty-one workplaces. Eight of the items reflect the commercial sector (items: 2, 4, 6, 7, 12, 14, 19, and 20). Three items reflect formal educational services (items: 3, 5, and 15). Five items were about voluntary or semi-government help-centres (items: 8, 10, 13, 17, and 21). Four items were related to civil service and social institutions operated by the government (items: 1, 9, 11, and 18). Research centre (item16) was also one of the items. Participants read the items and rated the degree of appropriateness of the working places for psychologists on a Likert scale.
Procedures

The instrument was distributed to the participants in a hall during their first meeting of an introductory psychology course for post-graduates. The subjects first attended to several simple questions regarding their background such as gender, degree obtained, and knowledge of psychology. They then rated the degree of appropriateness of workplaces for psychologists on a 7-point Likert scale. The number “1” referred to “extremely inappropriate”, and the number “7” denoted “extremely appropriate”. In the middle of the scale “moderately appropriate” were printed to avoid ambiguous responses such as “I do not know”. In addition, two samples of responses were used to illustrate connotations of the middle range: Psychologists work at Botanical Garden. Psychologists work at theatre. If the subjects think that Botanical Garden is a working place that is moderately appropriate (to the high end), they should mark the number “5”. Should they consider theatre as a working place that is moderately appropriate (towards the low appropriateness end), they should choose the number “3”. The subjects returned the questionnaires to the researchers within 10 minutes.

Results

The Cronbach's Alpha of the twenty-one items was high, at 0.88. Three factors emerged from the oblique analysis with eigen-values of more or equal to 1 that in all accounted for 50.9% of variance. The criteria for inclusion of the factors were twofold, an eigen-value above 1 and a Cronbach's Alpha above 0.7. We left out item 14 for interpretation, as it did not befit the factor well. The first factor (F1) accounted for 29.9% of variance was labelled business cum social sector comprising eleven items (Alpha =.85). The second factor (F2) accounted for ten percent of variance was labelled counselling cum help services consisting of eight items (Alpha =.82). The third factor (F3) accounted for five per cent of variance comprising two items (Alpha =.70) was labelled higher educational and research institution (research question 1). Correlations among the factors were between -.19 and -.28. Table 1 displays the factor loading of the items.
Table 1: Factor Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising companies (#7)</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing research (#4)</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relation firms (#20)</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial companies (#2)</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer software companies (#19)</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting firms (#12)</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airlines / airports (#6)</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisons (#18)</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation centres (#17)</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orphanages (#21)</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling centres (#10)</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military services (#9)</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>-.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police departments (#11)</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health hospitals (#1)</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.51*</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social welfare services (#13)</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care centres (#8)</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools (#3)</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.39*</td>
<td>-.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities (#15)</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media (#14)</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research centres (#16)</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Education (#5)</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variance 29.86 13.91 7.16
Eigenvalue 6.27 2.92 1.50
Cronbach’s Alpha .85 .82 .70

N=121; * selected for F2

Factor score (denoted by Fn) was computed by selected items with a factor loading greater than 0.3 and divided by the number of items. In general, the subjects rated counselling cum help services (Fn2) the highest, followed by higher educational and research institution (Fn3) and business cum social sector (Fn1). There was no gender difference on the ratings of all factors (research question 2). Subjects who claimed that they have had some exposure to psychology (have read books on psychology and have attended psychology courses) rated higher than those who claimed that they did not. Results of two-independent sample t-test reported that those who attended psychology courses rated significantly high ratings on F3 than those who did not (research question 3). Between student teachers who read books on psychology and those who did not, there was no significant difference on their ratings for all factors (research question 4). Social science graduates rated all factors higher than their science and engineering graduate counterparts and significantly higher for Fn3 (research question 5). Table 2 summarises means, standard deviations and significant results of the factors across groups.
Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Significant Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n=121)</th>
<th>Female (n=97)</th>
<th>Male (n=24)</th>
<th>Read book on psychology</th>
<th>Attended courses on psychology</th>
<th>Science/ Engineering (n=26)</th>
<th>Social science (n=85)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fn1</td>
<td>3.86 (1.11)</td>
<td>3.81 (1.13)</td>
<td>4.07 (1.01)</td>
<td>3.98 (1.14)</td>
<td>4.04 (1.09)</td>
<td>3.67 (1.04)</td>
<td>3.92 (1.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fn2</td>
<td>5.59 (0.82)</td>
<td>5.59 (0.83)</td>
<td>5.59 (0.81)</td>
<td>5.63 (0.74)</td>
<td>5.70 (0.75)</td>
<td>5.54 (0.93)</td>
<td>5.59 (0.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fn3</td>
<td>4.98 (1.09)</td>
<td>4.96 (1.12)</td>
<td>5.00 (1.01)</td>
<td>5.07 (1.16)</td>
<td>4.83 (0.98)</td>
<td>4.30 (1.05)*</td>
<td>4.42 (0.88)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05, ** p<0.01

Discussion

Counselling and helping services (F2): Singaporeans in this study perceived psychologists as working in places that typically provide help. It is unclear, however, because of the workplace examples used (i.e., prisons, rehabilitation centres, social welfare services, etc.), if the subjects’ perceive clients who utilise such services to be “abnormal” people who have deviated from social norms such as prisoners, criminals, mental health patients, abandoned children, and drug addicts. Such clarification, while not within the scope of this study, would be an interesting and necessary follow-up study as it informs us about factors that influence social perception of the role of psychologists and consequently why certain sources of help are not preferred and shunned from.

With respect to the historical and social context of Singapore, where helping services were predominantly provided by the medical, social work, and religious professions simply due to availability, it would not be uncommon for subjects to hold these impressions as they responded to the instrument in this study. Helping approaches also tended to be remedial in orientation rather than preventive or developmental. Singapore’s historical mental health institution, commonly known as “Woodbridge”, although recently renamed and definitely more progressive in approach, still evokes in many the notion of people seeking help as being “crazy”. It may be possible therefore that the subjects were unclear about the differentiation between psychologists, psychiatrists, and even social workers. While this ambiguity does not defeat the significance of this study, further research to clarify this ability to differentiate would be extremely meaningful in helping psychologists educate about their roles.

Higher education and research centres (F3): Singaporeans rated research centres, university, and ministry of education, to be moderately appropriate places for psychologists to work. Psychology is not a subject in schools, and neither is it one of the introductory courses for undergraduate students. If we examine the courses offered by the Psychological Studies at the NIE for Diploma, Degree, and Post-graduate Diploma in education, almost none of the title titles of the courses are attached to the term psychology except with reference to child and adolescent development, cognitive development, theories of learning, that pertain to basic knowledge useful for teachers in teaching, learning, and classroom management. Such topics are also presented in a general overview format with few opportunities for in-depth coverage. That is, psychological theories and models are presented via an implicit rather than explicit approach. Unless faculty members who teach the course emphasise the roles of psychology and the contributions of psychologists in teacher education, teachers and student teachers are not overtly aware of the significance of this discipline.
It should be noted here, however, that unlike majoring in psychology as a discipline, students in this study are primarily in higher education to become teachers. Their curriculum is therefore focused more on the content of their teaching subject, pedagogy, and classroom management. Nevertheless, in the applied aspects of teaching, learning, and student management, these authors feel that many psychological principles are applied, whether intentionally or unconsciously and it is especially the latter form of usage and it's potential abuse or misuse that concerns us. Counselling, in particular, as an intervention, is increasingly used in schools and will be discussed further at the end of this paper.

A subsequent question that may be considered is whether professionals who hold a degree in psychology will identify themselves as psychologists, should their work be at the university, the ministry of education, or research centre. We suspect that colleagues who work in the university, particularly one that does not directly offer psychology as a primary field of study or “major” for students may be more likely to identify themselves with roles of lecturers or a professors, those who are with the ministry of education as civil servants or teachers, and those who work at the research centres as researchers respectively. It would be interesting for future research to explore our hypothesis.

Following the above discussion, the difficulty in establishing a professional identity is best understood within the cultural context. Unlike more developed nations where the term “Psychologists” evolved to imply having obtained post-graduate training and certification or licensure, Singapore’s initial undergraduates in psychology graduated into work settings that gave them the title “psychologists”. Anecdotally, many were known to find themselves required to do psychological testing or therapy beyond the undergraduate training received. Eventually with the growing demands of human and helping services in Singapore, many either found themselves obtaining further training through workshops, post-graduate diplomas, or graduate education locally or overseas until the NIE program was introduced in 1997.

Business cum social sector (F1): Singaporean participants did not consider business and social sectors as possible workplaces for psychologists. We may interpret that Singaporean participants of this study have a limited view of the application of psychological knowledge (models and theories) to everyday life. Also, they may not know that psychological models and theories are widely employed by experts in the areas of human resource management, artificial intelligence, finance, business, marketing, or sales, as some examples. In recent years, for example, there has been a concern about the use of psychological tests for job placement purposes by human resource professionals not necessarily trained in psychology.

Knowledge of psychology: Does knowledge of psychology influence a person's perception of the working places of psychologists? Participants who claimed that they attended psychology courses and who read books on psychology rated the factors slightly higher than their counterparts who did not. A significant result was obtained for Fn3 between participants who read psychology books and those who did not. The high ratings indicate that people who have some knowledge of psychology are relatively certain of their perception of possible working places for psychologists. If we consider our assumption as “correct", we should suggest to schools and colleges to be more explicit in exposing students to the knowledge and contribution of psychology to society. To develop a clear professional status for psychologists in Singapore, it is important to educate the public on the roles and utility of psychology for society. In order to do so, however, professional institutions, colleges, schools, social institutions, and lawmakers themselves, need have a clear picture of what psychology has to offer as a discipline, and how psychologists can contribute as professionals. While, the country context of this study is experiencing steady growth in the progress of the field of
psychology, these authors believe that the pattern of progress can be more organized, more concerted, more deliberate, and less implicit and left to chance.

**Psychology in various disciplines:** From our study, we realise that social science graduates rated all factors higher than their engineering counterparts, and significantly higher for Fn3. Psychology is a humanistic discipline in Singapore. It is therefore not surprising that social science students are interested in and exposed to the knowledge of psychology. However, psychology is, in fact, a multidisciplinary field with broad implications for science, technology, business, as well as the humanities and liberal arts. The fact that the human psyche is regularly involved in every aspect of work and living suggests therefore that psychology as a discipline possesses a cauldron of knowledge valuable to all undergraduate students. Furthermore, the introduction of psychological courses to students of other disciplines is congruent with the trend internationally with higher education faculty that encourages interdisciplinary cooperation and research leading to opportunities for interdisciplinary knowledge, innovation, and invention.

**Implications for Teacher Education**

The study showed that Singaporean teachers, specifically teachers-in-training, in this study possess a relatively limited view of psychology. This should not be too surprising when one appreciates the context of psychology in Singapore. Psychology is neither a compulsory course nor a readily available subject of study in the Singaporean education system. Being a psychologist is also an uncommon profession in Singapore. To appreciate this vocational scenario, one needs to understand first, that Singapore is thirty-three years young as a nation and, second, that her brief history of helping services has been dominated by religious workers and social workers. This situation is not necessarily the result of an absence of training in psychology but more the presence of human resources and vocations available at certain points in the nation’s history.

 Anyone who knows the daily regimen of teachers will readily agree that teachers are in a profession that works directly with human lives and can undoubtedly impact students in significant ways – both positively as well as negatively. Especially since the publication of the Towards Excellence in Education Report (Ministry of Education 1987) and the introduction of Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG) as a whole-school approach to helping students adopted from the United Kingdom, teachers have increasingly assumed multiple roles in the classroom. Combine the student welfare functions with recent educational initiatives in Singapore and one discovers that many of these roles employ applied psychology principles whether as a teacher-counsellor, in strategising increasing levels of creativity and thinking in the classroom, sensitising students to informational technology, or daily effective student management. While it is accurate to say that such responsibilities do not qualify teachers to be called psychologists, our emphasis is that psychology as a discipline directly applied in education be taught more explicitly and in its entirety to avoid dilution of psychological knowledge, but more importantly, to avoid the misapplication of psychology in the classroom and school.

With respect to the PCCG teacher-counsellor notion that appears to be somewhat overshadowed by the introduction of the Lifeskills for Effective Living Series (Ministry of Education, 1997), more clarification is needed in defining the roles these teachers play with respect to psychological interventions as well as the level of training teachers receive in order to effectively assume the role of counsellors. As with our earlier mention of psychological test usage in the business sector, similar safeguards will need to be in place for teachers who may be inclined to use psychological instruments in the classroom. Still starkly absent in schools is a full-time position of school psychologists or counsellors not distracted by the duties of teachers and not coloured by the dual relationship of evaluator (one who marks and gives grades) and counsellor as posited by the
teacher-counsellor notion. Dual relationship situations are deemed unethical by most international ethical codes of conduct for psychologists. This scenario supports the current work of psychological associations in Singapore towards exploring the best certification, registration, and eventually licensing process that will serve to protect the psychological welfare of the public, and in this case, students.

In order for better quality control measures in the practice of psychology in education, schools should therefore acknowledge the professional credibility of teachers who have interest and knowledge in psychology, and seek ways to encourage such teachers to gain as much training and practice as possible. Consequently, teacher education institutions should explore ways to better incorporate psychology courses in the teacher-training curriculum. The curriculum may include, within the broad continuum of psychology, relevant subjects from fundamental child and adolescent development concepts, learning theories, and social psychology towards more applied psychological domains of educational and counselling psychology. Teachers with interests in the application of psychology in education should also be encouraged to be a member of the Singapore Psychological Society in order to benefit from continuous training and education. Teachers are significant social agents. How teachers perceive psychology, the authors believe, directly affects the way psychology is practiced in the schools. That is, misinformation will encourage misapplication whereas accurate knowledge will entail effective practice.

The authors acknowledge that for psychology to be successfully applied in education, the larger society and culture needs to be affected as well. The authors also recognize the unique context of Singapore and her education system and a separate paper may address the constraints and challenges of applying psychology in such a context. Further discussion is also needed in the application of psychology across cultures as well as studies of the general public’s perception of psychologists and a deeper understanding of social, personal, cultural, political, or even religious explanations for their perceptions.

References


