Fitting into the written world: An ethnography of illiterates

Martin L. Harding

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FITTING INTO THE WRITTEN WORLD:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ILLITERATES

By
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B.A., University of Montana, 1975

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

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The topic of this study is the social participation of persons who cannot read and write. An ethnographic description is presented of the problems illiterate persons have in our literate society. Practical skills of getting by are discussed. A primary feature of their social lives is the desire for concealment, yet strategies to hide illiteracy also act to preclude active participation. Natural conversation in everyday life is a problematic membership practice. It was found to contain literacy talk which illiterates cannot produce. Social relationships are adversely affected; various family roles and friendships are incompletely accomplished and burdened by the illiterates' dependence on others for surrogate literacy.

Qualitative methods were used throughout the research process. Data collected using unstructured interviews with 12 adult nonreaders were analyzed. The inability to read was found to affect a person's social involvement by limiting that person to marginal membership in groups. Illiteracy reduces an individual's ability to perform competently as a member in natural conversations, everyday interactions, and social relations. It was found from illiterates' accounts that they naturally view themselves as disabled. The study concludes that their disability is primarily sociocultural. It is also argued that the concept "member" be expanded to include both oral and written language.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From beginning to end, this study is essentially a social product. I wish to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of several persons in particular for making this study possible. My advisor and thesis committee chairman, Joń Driessen, provided patient guidance and encouragement. Jan Milner contributed valuable ideas and needed support. Sam Miller gave me the inspiration to grow from many difficult times. And lastly, I must thank the informants themselves for their bravery and willingness to expose their lives to outside scrutiny. Whatever value this study holds is a result of their beautifully expressed stories.
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I'd say 90% of the world is written. What isn't? Think about it, yourself, and reach in your mind for what isn't. Everything. Everything that just seems everyday....

As you do get older, not reading's a pain in the ass. Because you're forced into a world that's made of words.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reading is not, in and of itself, an objective. The real aim is social participation and reading is but a tool—one means—for its attainment (Harman, 1975:2).

This study is about the social participation of illiterate persons in a literate society. My research shows that the inability to read bears strongly on individuals' social involvement, limiting those persons to marginal membership in the groups to which they belong. This study explores the problematic nature of accomplishing membership in human groups when one cannot read.¹

The topic of literacy² has received little attention in sociology. Traditionally, it has been viewed either as a demographic variable associated with the socioeconomic development of nations or as a secondary concern behind major

¹The extent of illiteracy varies according to how it is defined and measured. Using years of schooling completed as the criterion, the 1969 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976) estimated 1% of the United States population to be illiterate. Based on the concept of "functional literacy," recent research (Texas University, 1975) has predicted that 22% of the adult population cannot adequately complete perfunctory tasks, and an additional 34% were scored as marginally competent. In all, it was estimated that over 50% of our population lack sufficient reading and writing skills to perform at the level of a fully functioning adult.

²Theoretically, illiteracy refers to an ultimate point, the total absence of reading and writing. It marks one extreme of the literacy continuum and is subsumed in the broader concept of literacy. Luis Aracil has commented that the term might be more correctly denoted as "[il]literacy" (April, 1979, Missoula, Montana).
issues of civil rights, poverty, crime, and unemployment. For purposes of this research, literacy happens to people rather than to nations and to ethnic subcultures; at this personal level of analysis literacy (or illiteracy) is a distinctly sociological idea. It occurs among groups of people in patterned ways and in specific cultural, historical, and societal contexts. The way people treat one another largely determine who reads (or does not read) what material and for what reasons.

Membership. Central to this study is the concept of membership. Gumperz and Hymes (1972:304-305) use the term member to refer to "mastery of a natural language, where language includes not only grammar but also its use." I shall modify their definition to include the mastery of oral and written language. Full membership in American society is granted to those persons able to speak, read, and write English. Sociologically, then, illiterates lack routine command of language in its written form and therefore may be seen as marginal members.

This study is organized around the basic problems illiteracy creates for social participation and membership in society. Chapter 2 discusses a principal problem in the life of an illiterate: concealment of the deficiency. The incomplete accomplishment of family roles and of intimate relationships is covered in Chapter 3. Being dependent on others is also examined. The fourth chapter describes membership problems occurring in language and in everyday conversation.
A fifth chapter deals with special skills illiterates develop and with problematic social situations where reading is a taken for granted requirement. A concluding chapter will summarize the consequences of illiteracy for social participation. Before moving directly to these topics, the present chapter continues with a review of three approaches to the sociology of illiteracy. A discussion of the research methods used will conclude this introduction.

**PERSPECTIVES ON ILLITERACY**

Three perspectives on illiteracy have been identified in the literature. Together, they form a background for the study. From these perspectives and the accounts of illiterates, an alternative model will be developed through this research and presented in the concluding chapter. This model is derived from actual lived experiences of illiterates and represents a grounded approach to sociological conceptualization.

**Historical Perspective.** The development of language and literacy is often linked with the development of civilization. Green (1952) has commented that the presence of written language is the essential factor differentiating true civilizations from primitive cultures. This preliterate-literate dichotomy is suggested by the sociological classification of societies as either folk or urban. The tribal village is characterized as illit-

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3 See Glaser and Strauss (1967).

4 As reflected in, for example, Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity or Tonnies' Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.
erate and dominated by an oral tradition, while the modern in-
dustrial society is literate and emphasizes the written word.

In contrast to this dichotomy, Jack Goody (1968) has de-
scribed a literacy continuum. He found that most cultures have
had "restricted literacy" and were

influenced in some degree by the circulation of the
written word, by the presence of groups or individuals
who could read and write. They lived on the margins
of literacy (4-5).

Today's illiterates lie in a unique location along the prelit-
erate-literate continuum. Their society utilizes writing to a
greater extent than ever before. Historically, they represent
an anomaly, being stuck in an oral mode of communication with-
in a written world.

Deviance Perspective. Another perspective considers illiteracy
as a form of deviance. Our society has a commonly understood
norm that its members can read and write, so a person whose be-
havior fails to conform with this expectation is defined as
deviant or "odd" in that respect. Erving Goffman (1963) uses
illiteracy as an example of "stigma," a discrediting attrib-
ute. Discrediting information about one's identity is care-
fully controlled by interactional strategies such as covering
and concealing. While Goffman emphasizes information manage-
ment, Howard S. Becker (1963) stresses the process of bestowing
a deviant label, which for illiterates begins in the first year
of school. The inability to read is less damaging socially
than are the reactions of others to one's nonreading public conduct
that comes to be labeled deviant.

The deviance focus of Goffman and Becker centers on the management of stigmatizing information and the strains of being labeled illiterate. Together, these approaches provide a useful description of person who cannot read.

Involvement Perspective. The inability to read is generally considered to have a debilitating effect on a person's inclusion and interaction in groups, but the exact nature of this malintegration remains unclear. Emerald Dechant (1965) states:

The mastery of speech is a prerequisite to full participation in society...[This] applies with equal force to writing and reading...In our society unless a child can read, he does not perceive himself to be an 'enfranchised' member of the group or society (14-15).

Reading for Dechant is a socialization process through which a person comes to learn the attributes of membership. Without reading, a person is socially incomplete and not fully integrated into either the more intimate, personal groups or the wider, more impersonal relationships in society.

Freeman and Kassebaum (1956), however, found that illiterates constitute a distinctive group within society. People in their study "perceive themselves and were perceived by others as members of a special category" (372). They formed an "illiterate subsystem" because they were poorly integrated into society at large and highly integrated into a subcultural group.

5 In particular, the second chapter on labeling and concealment draws much from this perspective.

6 These conclusions may reflect their structural emphasis and the high proportion of Southern blacks in their sample.
A related sociological idea is that of "marginality." Robert Park (1928) originated the term in reference to a person caught in a cultural bind between two groups with whom he has partial acceptance and allegiance. I prefer to use "marginal" in the sense of peripheral, not fitting into the mainstream but relegated to the fringe. This study will argue and document how illiterates are nonfranchised or marginal members of our society, and also how being illiterate is a problematic and largely private experience of the individual.

**METHODS**

The study of illiterates was conducted within the framework of natural or qualitative sociology as expounded by Garfinkel (1967), Cicourel (1964), Schatzman and Strauss (1973), Filstead (1970), Schwartz and Jacobs (1979), and the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967). A fundamental assumption of this approach is that persons, as members of society, are capable of recognizing and participating in the ongoing, organized activities of everyday life. Members can produce reflexive talk about their meaningful experiences, and through such talk the social consequences of illiteracy may be studied. In the case of illiteracy, focusing on members' talk may well be the best procedure available because of the sensitive nature of the subject, the individuals' ability to conceal their behavior and identity, and the inability to understand questionnaires and other written material.

Definitions of illiteracy have centered on years of
schooling completed or mean test scores of certain grade or age levels. Assignment of a person's reading level by school grade (i.e., "fifth-grade level") is commonly done by educators. A recent innovation has been the concept of functional literacy or competency; emphasis here is on the reading and writing abilities necessary to function adequately in a particular societal context. Any adult is capable of assessing how sufficient his/her reading abilities are for the desired performance of roles and participation in society. These two approaches are combined in this research for a definition that is methodologically practical. An illiterate adult is a person having low or minimal reading abilities as identified by professional educators and/or as confirmed by the individuals themselves.

**Sampling.** Illiterates do not want to be identified in relation to their imperfection and have many skills and strategies to conceal themselves. Even the promise of help and remedial instruction will rarely bring them forward; the federal Adult Basic Education Program each year reaches only 1% of its estimated target population of 57 million people (Comptroller General, 1975). Locating a sample of illiterates willing to participate in research is similarly difficult. Attempts were made through employers, friends and relatives, educators, and counselors in social service agencies. Best results were obtained by contacting reading instructors in the adult education centers of post-secondary educational institutions. The teachers
were asked to select from among their students potential informants who fit the desired criteria (adults with low or minimal reading abilities willing to talk about their experiences). These teachers were protective of their students, but once their cooperation was gained they proved to be extremely useful in explaining and legitimizing the study, introducing the interviewer to respondents, helping acquire the respondents' permission to be interviewed, and providing information and experiences of their own.

Twelve adult nonreaders comprise the research sample, 2 women and 10 men. All were Montana residents ranging in age from 20 to 56. At the time of being interviewed, all but four were receiving remedial instruction and one had recently discontinued his studies. Additional interviews were conducted with 5 reading teachers, 2 spouses, and 2 high school nonreaders.

Many persons in the sample were actively engaged in learning to read and write. The only efficient means of locating illiterates proved to be through teachers at learning centers where nonreaders are taught. The instructors did not want to jeopardize their teacher-pupil relationships and chose for study only those students who had reached a level of self-awareness where they were no longer embarrassed and hesitant to discuss their problem. Thus a selection factor operated favoring persons who were more verbal and reflective in telling their experiences. They could recognize the influence of reading
and nonreading on their lives. Some individuals had acquired a new realization and could recount "what it was like before." This selection factor acted to improve qualitatively the sample by including the more reflective and articulate students.

**Interviews.** Data were collected through the unstructured or nonstandardized interview, in which open-ended questions are posed in unspecified order (Denzin, 1970:126). Each interview covered the recognized topics of concern as well as any new relevant areas emerging from the respondent's talk. Subsequent interviews further explored these emergent themes. Development of concepts and hypotheses thus proceeded throughout the research process directly from the data in what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call a "grounded" approach. The interviewing process concluded at the point of saturation when no new topics were emerging and sufficient data were present to explore the newly generated concepts and their properties.

**Data Analysis.** Following the grounded approach taken by Glaser and Strauss, the collection, coding, and analysis of data all proceeded simultaneously. Analysis was based on their "constant comparative method: while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category" (106). The research data consist of verbatim transcriptions of tape recorded interviews with illiterates together with all recorded notes and observations from interviews with spouses and teachers. These materials were subjected to the technique of
"Topical Analysis" (Driessen, n.d.). Initially, classification schemes were developed providing conceptual categories and properties. Closure was achieved when the underlying patterns discovered from the data could be inductively generalized into broader, unifying concepts.
CHAPTER 2

"JUST A DUMMY": LABELING AND CONCEALMENT.

Illiteracy does not occur suddenly in adulthood but is the continuation of a natural condition of infancy. It develops throughout a person's life in what can be called a career. Nonreading adults have grown up and gone through at least some schooling without learning to read and write. They have encountered the name calling and have become "stupid" and "dumb." They have faced teasing and ridicule. As a result of the labeling and what it has conferred, they feel shame and embarrassment. Thus they conceal their deficiency from everyone. One recent report (Council of Adult Education, 1974) described the adult life of illiterates as one of "ingenious, deliberate subterfuge." Keeping others from knowing their secret is the predominant concern of their social lives and precludes the accomplishment of a sense of participation. This chapter will describe first the labeling process and its effects on illiterates and, secondly, the main reaction to labeling--concealment. Also considered are discovery and disclosure, both of which can result when concealment fails.

LABELING

The ability to read is taken for granted in our society. Not to read is deviant; one becomes susceptible to stigmatizing labels:

Society expects it from you. If you don't have it, then there's "Why?" If there's so many of these funny people it's cruel to treat them like that. But im-
mediately they label you. They label you "stupid," really. "Well what's the matter, are you retarded?" I got that a couple of times, when I was talking about it to others. No, I'm not retarded, I wasn't retarded. If you are retarded, fine, you work around it. But I wasn't, you know. I thought I was.

Several labels were mentioned as commonly referring to a non-reader's deficiency; "stupid," "dumb," and "retarded" were most frequently cited. These labels question a person's character by suggesting a lack of intelligence. An individual must display intelligence, among other attributes, to be considered a normal social being. When persons cannot read they are viewed as unintelligent, and the labels present that identity of them to others. This awareness of one's intelligence is found in the following statement:

I think most people that can't read, their feelings are real easy hurt because you don't want somebody to think that you're just a dummy, that you never learned anything. Why, I used to have the opinion of myself that I was kind of retarded, and I'm really not. But you get that opinion of yourself when you don't learn anything.

The previous two quotations contain references to an acceptance of labels and the meanings conveyed. Stigmas such as illiteracy come to be understood while one is learning that he or she suffers that stigma. During talk about the "names," many illiterates indicated they had accepted such labels as referring to themselves. As one man states, "All these people running around, they're illiterate. I used to be very prejudiced about that word, too, but anymore, that's what I am."
The label of "illiterate" produces a variety of emotional responses. Because the labels are derogatory and stigmatizing, feelings of shame and embarrassment are commonplace. Some expressed "hurt feelings":

It makes you feel horrible. It does, knowing you can't read. You feel hurt all the time. You feel like, "Oh, why try?" I'm so hurt that I never could learn that. You just really want to give up.

Others felt isolated and alienated:

Now when I get embarrassed, I get a real dark, dreary feeling about me, I get real dissatisfied with myself. I get real down about it and, I ain't kidding you, just right on the edge of being a hermit... There have been times when I felt it'd be a lot easier to put a bullet in your head than it would be to go on fighting this cotton-picking world.

Several men expressed anger toward labels and people who (often unintentionally) use the labels. One young man felt great emotional distress when playfully called "weirdo" by his girlfriend and "dummy" by his father. Other persons also spoke of being sensitive in social situations where labels occur, as when people "pick on" or "poke fun at" nonreaders. In general, illiterates report great emotional sensitivity to even the more ordinary labels which can suggest lower intelligence.

Along with the labeling process, they described a pat-

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These labels gain stong social and psychological impact largely because of the process through which they are developed. As Becker has pointed out, a labeling process occurs among people; it is a deliberate social accomplishment. The process continues throughout a person's illiteracy career, but exact meanings and labels may vary as a person ages and societal expectations change. In early childhood illiteracy is natural. It becomes socially defined only after a child enters school. By initiating the labeling process, schools act as "discrediting institutions" (Goffman, 1963).
tern of gradual separation from fellow students who could read. Nonreaders were singled out informally as objects for special attention and ridicule by peers and teachers:

I don't know if everybody's like this, I just know what it did for me. But of course it was so extreme, the stupidity was so extreme. And the pains that you felt and the hurt that you went through. And the laughter you went through. I remember this one time I was in eighth grade. It was really hard for me. I was really a nervous person. They asked me to stand up and read, and he (the teacher) knew I couldn't read. And they were laughing, everybody was laughing so hard. And the teacher was laughing. I went in this corner and kneeled down in the corner just crying and crying. I'll never forget that.

Another person recalled being labeled and given special inattention:

I never learned any of this in school, never. They sit me in a corner with a color book clear to the eighth grade. Or they sent me back there with stamps, put stamps in a book. They never taught me a thing. They thought I was retarded. It was real difficult at first. And I always thought I was stupid.

The physical separation of being sent to a corner, and the social isolation of having few if any friends were often described. A very visible social separation was the placement of an illiterate in a lower grade or class. One person told of "being put in a special education class" and of the name calling which followed:

I couldn't really study or get any farther than they were, and I would think to myself I'm like they are, not like the rest of the kids are. And that's a big problem of people with dyslexia. They start thinking that they're at a dumb level, not at a regular level with the rest of

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2 The pattern is typical of all but one case. The oldest interviewed was a schoolboy during the Depression, left school to support his family, and "forgot how to read and write."
the world. They're goons or something, freaks.

Final separation usually results in the young illiterate terminating schooling by dropping out.

Separation and labeling in school make a child's differences known to himself and to others. The individuals enter school as young children and leave it as stigmatized persons, "dummies" because they were unable to learn reading. Their adult lives were described as efforts toward the concealment of feelings, labels, and illiteracy.\(^3\)

\(^3\) However, those informants seeking remedial education reported a distinct change in their accumulated labels. The education system which once neglected their learning and stigmatized them with labels now was seen as providing them with legitimizing labels. These new labels are less stigmatizing and give "some real reason why I can't read." One person thought to be retarded and another who was originally told he "had a reading block" were found to have "dyslexia." Another person was given a variety of tests and "found out I was just a slow learner." Changing perceptions of one's illiteracy are also reported in these accounts:

She (a teacher) sent me to the eye doctor down here, the specialist. And he found I have a blind spot in my eye, both sides, about 30% blind vision. So you can't sound out a word you can't see. And that's why I never learned to read. I really thought I was stupid until he told me I had an eye problem, when he told me that there was a reason for me not learning. I feel very fortunate that they found it. I think my heart that day was really lifted to know there was something wrong with me. I was never so glad to find something wrong with me in my whole life.

* * * * *

The first IQ test was when I first started, and the company put it on. And my IQ was way low. In fact the guy that gave me the IQ test told me there has to be something mentally wrong with me. Now, when I had the test up here at the manpower center, I was way above average in several things, above average in most things. And the two things I was below average in was reading and the arithmetic that I had to read. That really amazed me. That really made me feel good, because I've gone through the biggest part of my life thinking that there was something wrong with me.
CONCEALMENT

To escape stigmatizing labels, illiterates resort to the practice of "hiding it," concealing their illiteracy from others. The informants talked about four methods for concealment. Most frequently cited was the use of avoidance, which involves eluding all forms of writing, talk about written topics, and situations where reading and writing may be encountered. All direct contact with the written world is eschewed.

Second was the method of faking it by pretending to engage in reading behavior. Faking behavior varies according to different situations but may include moving one's lips while pretending to read, looking at an open newspaper, or pausing and chuckling after being handed a written joke or cartoon. One man gave the following account of faking:

The first time I had to try faking it really is when I was with a friend. I met him not too long ago. He just moved to town, and he didn't have anybody that he knew around town. I went out to his place for a New Year's party, and they had this word game. You know, what do you do? His grandmother was there and I just figured well she's an older lady, maybe she might understand. So I'd just sound a word out as best that I would imagine what it would be, then I'd show it to her. Evidently she told them what the deal was, but I never had any problem after that with him.

A person can also conceal illiteracy by making excuses for the inability to perform reading and writing. An excuse allows the person to politely refrain from reading and can be followed by an appeal for assistance. A commonly employed excuse is:

Like I wear glasses. I cannot read without my glasses, that's for sure. But if there was something I didn't understand or if I didn't think I could read it, well I'd say, "Oh, I forgot my glasses. Here, you read it. I can't even see it." Cause I didn't want them to know how dumb I really was.

A final method mentioned was bluffing. Through deliberately strong or forceful behavior the persons can manipulate
the situation to preclude any demand that they read or write. Bluffing occurs primarily in impersonal situations toward others of lesser status such as children, secretaries, or clerks. One woman gave this account of bluffing:

When she wanted me to sign the papers, I always told her I'd come back later. I never attempted to sign them. A lot of times it would really be something because they would say, "Well, we don't do it that way." I would be strong about it and say, "Listen, I don't do nothing without my husband. I never put my name on anything without my husband. That's all there is to it. If you want your papers done, you're going to have to wait until then." Then they'd get annoyed with me and I'd get all red. And I hoped they'd just never suspect.

Developing Concealment Tricks. Conflicting reports were given for how concealing techniques emerge. One person stated his "little tricks" evolved through trial and error, the better methods being developed and continued. As he concluded, "There's ways of getting around things, lots of ways, and believe me you find them out...through embarrassment and experience." Another person emphasized the situational spontaneity of his methods as follows:

Sometimes I don't even know how myself, how I do things. It just subconsciously comes up. When you're around a crowd of people you've got to come up with something quick, pronto. And sometimes you don't really remember how you do it because, see, I think it's just a point of fear. My God, these people might know!

6 In no case did an informant mention having learned his methods from another person, literate or illiterate. All the methods, techniques, tricks, or skills described were individual adaptations or responses to a social problem as experienced solely by that person.
Discovered. People who hide their illiteracy must continually risk being "found out" for what they really are. They are susceptible to the very situation they constantly seek to avoid, being discovered. Nevertheless, all informants reported having experienced situations of their being discovered. Some instances were described as nonthreatening, such as when an intimate acquaintance or sympathetic other learns their personal secret. Most instances, however, were seen as threatening situations with great potential for shame and embarrassment. One commonly feared situation is that of being discovered at work, as this account shows:

Right at the end of the year we have to take an inventory for taxes, and I was doing OK. We had one person just writing everything out, and I was just counting. Then all of a sudden we came to the other room and everyone would just count stuff out because it was a lot of nuts and bolts. They had to write all this out. And I just panicked out. A lot of the things I had to write just aren't at my level yet. I just really panicked out.

Illiterates are generally so successful at concealment that they go unrecognized even by other illiterates. All informants stated that illiterates cannot readily spot one another. Occasionally one illiterate discovers another illiterate and experiences the situation from a literate person's

7 Being discovered is the actualization of the condition of vulnerability. Informants felt that in relationships vulnerability increases as they become more familiar or intimate with another person. As Goffman explains (1963:99), "By keeping relationships distant he ensures that time will not have to be spent with the other, for...the more time that is spent with another the more chance of unanticipated events that disclose secrets."
I asked him to write me a note, and he tried to get out of it. And I just thought he was being an asshole. I said, "What the hell's wrong with you? Write me a goddamn note." And he said, "I can't." I said, "Why can't you? I see nothing wrong. Here's a pen, there's your fingers, write!" Never did know how! And that just blew me away. I actually felt how somebody felt with me telling them. Cause it just totally blew me away. I knew this guy was never really no educated person but I didn't think ever, you know... I mean he got away with it for ten years.

One's illiteracy can be recognized in events from the ordinary daily routine. The informants told of being discovered by never reading the morning paper or by always hesitating to order in restaurants. Or, as a person said, spelling and writing may give it away:

My boss knows that I have a reading problem, but he doesn't know how bad it is. He's got a pretty good idea that I can't read all that well. I didn't tell him, he just figured it out by being around me. More or less my spelling. I misspell all kinds of different words, and he kind of figured it out from there. Like on things that are easy to spell, like sparkplug wires, we've got to write it down. So he knows, and the bookkeepers know. He'll look at it and say, "He misspelled it again."

Some individuals spoke of feeling vulnerable in public. They felt their problem ultimately cannot be concealed from family, friends, groups, or the outer community in which they live. They said that once persons are discovered information of their identity will eventually spread to complete strangers in the community. The following two accounts point this out:

What I don't like is if I walk into a place where it's crowded, there'll be a person in there that knows I can't read. I figure that by the time I leave, everybody else in that place will know that I don't know
how to read also. I feel that one person will tell another person, and it'll just go on.

You find that, if you live in a community, word like that gets around pretty fast. It's something that pretty much everybody knows. Like if you go to church or if you attend any kind of club or anything like that, even the basketball team. When one person finds out, why it ain't long before everybody knows about it. I've noticed myself, like when I moved to Farmersville, I was aware of it. Even now, I'll come up and meet somebody, and they'll get a first impression of me. And boy, he's just a special guy. And then they talk to somebody else about me, and next time you see them, why there's a little bit different feeling there. You know what it is.

The perceived vulnerability of illiterates demonstrates the paradox surrounding their social membership. As any relationship develops toward greater intimacy it is marked by an increasing threat to the concealment; close relationships are therefore avoided. Nevertheless, the problem may finally become known by "everyone," a circle of others extending beyond mere acquaintances. The illiterate feels vulnerable both personally and impersonally, and relationships and social interaction at all levels are inhibited.

Disclosure. Illiterates announce their handicap to others either voluntarily or under pressure. When discovery seems imminent and further concealment is impossible the information may be pressured from them. It is then less damaging to disclose one's identity than to face additional embarrassment by being-caught-in-the-act-of-concealment. These situations are tense and uncomfortable. One man described a pressured situations as follows:

First time I told someone was the boss I worked for. They'd read the tape for him. I didn't know how. I said, "Well, I don't know how to read it." It's OK when you're in first grade and it isn't too much hassle.
But when you get older it's really hard to tell somebody. The boss just said, "Well..." I couldn't do much right then but feel bad.

Many stories of being discovered "under pressure" describe a direct confrontation and interrogation by a literate acquaintance. The illiterate is suddenly and politely challenged with the literate's suspicions. This situation forces a response, and denial must alleviate the suspicions. One example of such a confrontation leading to disclosure was described:

My girlfriend found out just by being around me. Like I'd be driving on the highway or something, and she'd say, "What'd that sign say?" She knew I was looking right at it. I says, "I don't know, I didn't look." She finally caught on. Then how she really found out, she had an idea so she gave me a book. She told me to read it out loud. I couldn't. She didn't give me a chance to avoid it, or I had no excuse not to do it or anything. I just came out flat and I told her I didn't know how to read.

Disclosure under pressure can be embarrassing for others as well. One man described his avoidance of social participation as a way to prevent situations of double embarrassment:

At work in the morning you sit down with somebody and you get to talking about something you read in the newspaper. Well they'd say, "Did you read that in the newspaper?" Well you feel like a heel to say, "Well, no. I didn't read the newspaper." Well that gets old, you can't continuously say that seven days out of the week. So finally maybe one of them will break down and they'll say, "Well, huh, you can't read is the reason why you don't read the newspaper." You gotta say, "Well yeah." His face colors up about 14 different shades of red. Half a dozen other people sitting around there, they're talking about all the same thing in the paper. That's where it embarrasses, makes you feel bad. So then you just more or less try to steer off to yourself. You don't want to be embarrassed and you don't want to embarrass anybody because you don't know how to do it.
Attitudes differed on whether to disclose oneself in pressured situations. While some persons said they would not tell, most said that disclosure could make the relationships more comfortable. There was general agreement that other illiterates would never reveal themselves.

Disclosure can also be done voluntarily when no real threat exists to being discovered. One instance of a voluntary disclosure is the unexpected announcement, which can give the illiterate an element of surprise and lessen the potential for unexpected or adverse reactions of others. For example, one person stated:

Hell, I've drunk. Then I would get relaxed or something, I could come right out and tell them cause I would let down all of my guards. It's kind of fun, too, because I've had newspaper kids walk up and say, "Hey mister, you want a paper?" I say, "No, I can't read." And they just look at me and go, "Uhhh." So some of it's kind of comical. I've had a lot of bosses walk up to me and say, "Fred, can't you read, for Christ's sake?" And I say, "No." And they just mumble, walk away. They just slough it off.

Outright telling can serve as a kind of admission or confession similar to the "coming out" of homosexuals. This voluntary admission seems more common for persons who seek remediation and find the illiteracy labels as no longer applicable to themselves; they develop a new self-concept as "literate." As one woman said:

You ought to seen me the day that they showed me how to break those words up in syllables. That day I think I looked up every word in the dictionary I could find that was hard for me to pronounce. I had to call everybody and tell them that I learned how to break them up in syllables. It was really fascinating. I was thrilled to death. I told all my friends and all. I wouldn't
tell them nothing before, but that day it just tickled me to death. Then they laughed at me. They said, "Well we didn't realize you was having that kind of problem or we'd of helped you."

Telling was accomplished also by admitting to a less stigmatizing label such as "slow reader" rather than by giving a full disclosure. The problem can be talked about without revealing its true extent, as one man said:

What I used to say is that I'm just a slow reader, you know. That way they wouldn't know how much or how slow you was, but that you just went slow.

Having disclosed his secret, the illiterate is in an exposed position. The uncertain reactions of others must be confronted. The responses described were offers of assistance, totally ignoring the individual, closer questioning, and "strange looks." Creating an explanation can be problematic, as in this recounted experience:

Anymore, I'll just tell them, "I don't know what it says, I don't have no idea what it says." And they'd go, "Why?" And I'd say, "Well, if you've got about 45 minutes, I'd tell you why." But I blow a lot of people's shit away when I tell them I can't read. They can't comprehend why I can't. And when I tell them what dyslexia is, I don't really understand it myself. So I just quit explaining it.

SUMMARY

A necessary personal attribute for membership in our society is intelligence. A "normal" or acceptable level of intelligence is significantly displayed by knowing how to read and write. Illiterates cannot perform literate behavior and face being stigmatized and labeled as subnormal in intelligence. To prevent this loss of social standing, illiterates hide their
problem from others, but concealment precludes their participation in certain membership practices. They feel vulnerable to discovery and avoid involvement in close relationships with friends as well as in impersonal activities with groups in the community. An illiterate's restricted participation and feelings of differentness and isolation point to an estrangement within society.

This chapter has emphasized concealment as a particular feature of an illiterate's social relations. The next chapter will describe in more detail an illiterate's relationships with family, friends, and other social groups.
CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL RELATIONS THROUGH ILLITERACY

Membership in our society is gained and displayed through active participation in social life. To be members, we are expected to interact with other persons in acceptable ways and to participate skillfully in relationships according to the commonly understood roles being enacted. This chapter describes an illiterate's social relations and the problematic nature of membership in literate groups. At the most intimate level is the family, in which the adult roles are incomplete without literacy. A fundamental dependence on others is found, and conflicts arise from society's expectations for each member's independence. Less intimate relations include membership in informal groups of friends and in more formal organizations. A final section will consider the illiterate's involvement in our custom of carrying on written social relations.

DEPENDENCE

According to Goffman (1963:95), a discreditable person commonly uses a strategy of dividing the world into two groups, "a large group to whom he tells nothing and a small group to whom he tells all and upon whose help he then relies." The informal, casual relationships based upon concealment as Chapter One described are typical of the illiterate's involvement with the large, unknowing group of people. This section will characterize his close, intimate relations within the small group.
Other persons in this group are the wise, those with guilty knowledge of his stigma. The illiterate's relationships with these persons have the underlying quality of dependence; the illiterate comes to rely upon these persons for those competencies they possess and he lacks.

Almost all the persons on whom the illiterates reported being dependent were relatives. Reliance on family members is made possible for several reasons. There is a natural willingness to help each other in the family. Strong bonds and societal expectations create a social or moral obligation to help needy members. Additionally, all family members are subject to judgments based on the attributes of one member. Being related to a discreditable individual makes a person similarly susceptible. Family members are willing to help the illiterate and thus avoid being stigmatized themselves. They can be trusted to assist in concealment and to not expose or embarrass the illiterate to the outside world. In recalling the help his wife has provided him, one man said:

If a person doesn't have somebody to help them like that, you might just as well be dead. It's really bad. I've known, I'll bet you, six that I can think of just right offhand, people that couldn't read or write. And I know them personally enough to know the kind of lives that they've lived. Without good people along side of them, they wouldn't of been able to make it.

1 Goffman says this type consists of "the individual who is related through the social structure to the stigmatized individual" (1963:30).
Close physical proximity was mentioned as a necessary attribute of someone who could help. Family members are easily accessible when help is needed. Dependence on another's continual presence was said by more than one respondent to be detrimental to the relationship:

Life's a lot better since I'm learning because I don't have to ask people to do something for me because I don't know how to do it, is what it is. Before I always had to ask somebody. And I always wanted somebody around so they could help me do something if I got stuck on it. And now I've kind of liked it where I have my little privacy myself. Our marriage was on the rocks, it really was bad. And that's because I was so afraid to be without him because I was unable to take care of myself.

A final necessity is literacy; an illiterate relies on somebody that is more highly literate than himself.

Illiterates depend on other people primarily for help in dealing with their literate matters. Traditionally, this literacy assistance was provided by persons in roles such as town crier, parish priest, or other "reader." These literate persons would announce the news and read personal correspondence and other documents for illiterates. Today, everyday forms and applications must be filled out, directions and letters read; however, literacy help is not as formalized into specific roles and must be acquired from whoever will cooperate. One person described being helped before she returned to school:

He's (husband) willing to help me, he helps me all the time. Like if you've got something that needs filling out and you don't know how to spell the words, he used to fill them out for me. Now I fill them out myself. But he used to fill them out and just forget about it.
This type of help is actually surrogate literacy; another person must perform the total task in place of the illiterate. In this respect the help requested is much different from the help ordinarily exchanged between literate persons, which usually involves the spelling or defining of an unfamiliar word.

Other forms of help are often unsolicited, subtle, and unrecognized. Illiterates depend on those around them for information about everyday life:

I remember when we went to the airport and he almost went into the women's bathroom. "Women" instead of "men," and you just never look at things like that. You just walked into the women's bathroom. And Jimmy said, "Hey, you want to go in the next one!"

Help may also be protection from exposure and embarrassment or complicity in excuses and concealment. Others help the illiterates gain entrance to social life and facilitate their participation. They are helped to play games, play family roles, and contribute as members. An instance of nonembarrassing social help is:

You know the game Monopoly? Playing that you get a chance card. If I were to land on that, I'd have one of my brothers or sisters, they'd pick it up and they'd read it. I'd never have to do that, they knew about it so they'd just pick it up and read it. So they'd stick it back in and I'd do whatever it said. And I never did, I played it once with just friends, and I'd land on chance and I'd have to pick up the card. And I didn't know how to read it. It's very embarrassing for me so I never played with them again.

Independence. A person is independent when he or she is able to read and write competently in personal everyday affairs. Our society places high value on individuality, independence,
and personal autonomy, yet the illiterates' social relations exhibit a high degree of dependence and reliance on others. They cannot live up to societal expectations regarding the activities any normal person "ought" to be able to do for themselves. When dependent relations exist in matters otherwise accomplished by members independently, tensions and conflicts result for both actors, the illiterate and the depended upon significant other person (i.e., family member). A commonly encountered belief is that illiterates should become more independent, approaching a level so that they are "like" everyone else. Relationships between the illiterate and significant others can be distinguished according to the attitude each person takes on this issue, as Figure 1 illustrates. Four types of relations are found, two of which clearly suggest the presence of conflict—types 2 and 3.

**TABLE 1. A TYPOLOGY OF DEPENDENCY AND INDEPENDENCY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes toward the illiterate's increasing independence.</th>
<th>Illiterate positive</th>
<th>neutral, negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant Other positive</td>
<td>type 1</td>
<td>type 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Other neutral, negative</td>
<td>type 3</td>
<td>type 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type 1. Most relationships described by respondents fall into this category (perhaps because of sample bias\(^1\)). The illit-

\(^1\) Gaining independence is often associated with learning to read. Cases were found in the data to represent each type, however sample bias prevents the assignment of relative weight to each type.
erates want to be more independent in their literacy affairs and attempt regularly to increase their independence through learning, trying to read new things, and insisting that they be allowed to manage their affairs. Significant others encourage and support them in their efforts. These relationships face conflict when the support given by a significant other is interpreted as extraordinary help by the illiterate. In learning to read, particularly, the illiterate's independence grows and dependence on others fluctuates, making it difficult for others to perform the role of helper. An example of a changing relationship and the problem of giving too much help is:

Sometimes when I try and help Carl (her husband), I don't think I'm overprotective, but I think I want to help him. It's one of his hangups, it's one of the main arguments we have.

Type 4. Here, both persons accept the status quo of their relationship. The illiterate reports a desire to be able to read better but make no attempt to be more independent. They are content to rely on others, who do not seem to mind the occasional request for help and quickly disregard it afterwards. While this type of relationship represents the fewest number of cases, the illiterates involved are the youngest and oldest respondents (a high school student and a prison inmate). Societal expectations of an individual's literacy independence are less at either end of the age continuum. Conflicts result when the significant other is not immediately able or
willing to comply with the illiterate's demands, or when requests for help occur too often and the illiterate becomes a nuisance or "pest." The occasional problem of getting help is explained in this statement:

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Usually both of my parents help. It's really hard to get somebody to help you because not everybody wants to. They got a lot of other things they want to do. And to come up and say, "Hey, I need help on this or that," and they go to say well do it yourself. What do you say, you can't do it yourself or something? They always come back with "What are you, helpless or something?" How do you tell them you can't read to fill it out. Seems like they're not meaning to put you down. A lot of times I don't think of that.
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**Type 2.** In these relationships the illiterates are indifferent or unwilling to seek greater independence. Given their situation and circumstances, they find no reason to change. The significant other, however, wants the illiterate to establish independence and actively pushes the relationship in that direction. These opposing viewpoints create conflicts. One instance of this type is the wife who felt overburdened and wanted her illiterate husband to assume greater responsibility in their relationship. She described subtly forcing her husband to be more independent:

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I'll get to where I make him take responsibility. I make him go in and pay the bills and get receipts, and ask for different things. Some people say I'm mean, but he learns. Sometimes I say, "what's the sin of saying I'm not going to tell you if you can figure it our for yourself." And he'll sound the words out, and sometimes he won't get it all, but he'll get some. As of lately I haven't been doing that, but than all of a sudden I'll let him have it again and he'll get mad but he'll go do it and he feels better for doing it that way. I can't believe in letting him get away with it. I just don't want to have all the responsibility put on me.
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Type 3. The illiterates in this type of relationship actively seek and assert their independence from other persons who want to deny them their goal and continue the status quo of dependence. Conflict leads to a rebellion by the illiterate against the significant other's efforts to maintain control of the illiterate's affairs. The significant other is in the dominant position and comes to see that role as an obligation to provide protection for the illiterate. One wife described this feeling:

It's only because I know how offended Bill will get if someone all of a sudden goes, "You can't read?" They'll give him this kind of look. So it's just a habit for me when somebody asks him a question, I answer it for him. I don't mean to. And people think, they call him hen-pecked and say that I wear the pants in the family and all this crap. And it's not that way. It's just been a habit with me to protect him. It's just that way.

The illiterate, however, interprets these efforts as being overprotective, infringing upon his attempts. One man explained:

I could never live near her (his mother). I can visit her, but I couldn't be around her all the time. She's helped me so much before. All parents are going to want to help you as much as they can, but after awhile, when I tried to get on my own, I tried to do things myself. She just got overprotective because of my reading, I guess.

The struggle for independence represents a resistance to change in the relationship and is perceived by some significant others as threatening its continued existence. Efforts are made to resist or block such changes. One woman related her husband's reaction to her return to school in this account:

I really was scared. My husband forbid me to come here, he forbid me to come. He was afraid once I
learned something I'd leave him. He didn't want me stupid but he didn't want me to learn anything for fear that I'd leave him. And with four kids that's not funny. He fought me, and I snuck. Oh, I was so scared. Finally when I started learning things and I didn't leave him, then he accepted it.

In another instance the independence granted by a driver's license was actively resisted:

When I went to get my driver's license, I started studying the book. My husband told me for a whole week, "What are you going to go down there and show them your stupidity for? You're going to go down there and you're going to flunk the son-of-a-bitchin' test," he kept telling me. I kept telling myself I could do it, just study. He even said it at home, I would be reading that book and he'd say, "Put the book away, you're not going to learn it, you're not going to pass that test." That morning he wouldn't give me gas to get down there to go take my test. He swore I was going to make a fool out of myself. A good friend of mine came and got me, let me use her car. I took the test and came back with the paper, and I says, "Here, sucker." I passed the test. His mouth dropped open and his eyes got big and he could not believe I passed that test. From then on he never bothered me again about me learning. He honestly thought I was going to go down there and make a fool of myself.

Another related how his mother developed resentment to his increasing independence:

She resented me trying to do my own things. Before, she'd always want me to bring home my bills, and she'd do my bills and make sure I got my rent paid. I just didn't like that at all. I figured that I'm a person, and I've got to be able to take care of myself. I can't run home everytime I'm stuck on something. She kind of resented that a little bit.

Dependent relationships and the desire for greater independence can create other conflicts. The illiterate may be caught in dependent relations of different types, unable to adjust or compromise roles to adequately fit each situation. In one
instance, the illiterate's mother feels protective of him and reluctant to give him independence, but his wife is supportive and eager for him to succeed. The illiterate has come to resent help of any kind, straining relations with both the wife and mother. His wife said:

Sometimes he puts me in his mom's place. She tried to help him too much. Sometimes he thinks I try and help him too much. Then I don't want to help him sometimes because I'm afraid that maybe I'll go too far, I'll hurt his feelings. That's really hard for him, to let other people realize what's wrong and try and help him.

Lastly, conflict arises when a dependent relationship is misunderstood by others not directly involved. Outsiders see that the relation does not follow ordinary societal expectations and current attitudes about sex roles. Concealing the problem of illiteracy leads others to interpret or make sense out of the individual's odd behaviors in other, more familiar terms. Thus the husband is thought "henpecked" instead of illiterate. The illiterate wife is considered too reliant on her husband and not a modern, independent woman. One wife explained this problem as follows:

They'd give me a little guff every now and then about taking the papers home, belittling me because I had to have my husband know every little thing I did. Since they didn't understand, they just assumed that I was scared of him, and he had to know everything. That wasn't the case, the case was I couldn't do it so I took it to him. Most people sit down and fill out a form, they don't take it home to their husbands. So they thought that I wouldn't do a thing without my husband. Therefore, I'm so attached to him, you know what I mean? That I'm so reliant on him. Most women try to stand up and say, "Well you don't run me." You know that kind of attitude? Well if I'm having him sign all my papers and reading everything and OKing
everything before I do it, well then he's total master of me, and this is what I'm betrayed in, that my husband is total master. Which how many women in this day begin to have a husband who's total master? Well they felt that he was running my life and therefore I was letting down as a woman. I wasn't standing up, and why shouldn't I stand up? So therefore in a way I'd be punished for that.

FAMILY RELATIONS

The previous section has described a characteristic of the illiterate's intimate relationships: family members are heavily depended on for help in managing financial, literate, and social matters. Because of the societal expectation that all persons accomplish their own affairs, a variety of conflicts are inherent in the dependent relations. This section considers other effects of illiteracy on the roles and relations an individual has as a family member.

Parental Relations. Intimate relations are first developed and experienced in the family of origin, where an individual plays the son/daughter role. Societal expectations dictate affection and respect towards one's parents, but such traits may be difficult for the illiterate to display. Offspring come to hold feelings and attitudes based on past relations and parents' role performance. Several individuals reported little affection and respect for their parents because of judgments that their mother or father had provided them with inadequate affection, training, care, and security. Instead of love, they felt resentment. One woman felt her mother had contributed to her illiteracy, and she explained the unhappiness her mother had caused
and her subsequent lack of affection in this way:

I don't have very much to do with my mother, and a lot of it has to do with the way I was treated when I was a child. Even when I was older, in a way I blame her for it. In fact, in a way I even hate her for it because if she'd loved me she would of helped me and not made me go through it, much less make it worse for me. She would stand in front of people and tell them that I was stupid, in front of me. And I feel if she really had a heart in her, she'd never have done that. To me that was cruel. I remember asking my mother, "Why don't you help me with my schoolwork like you help my brother?" She says, "You're unhelpable, it doesn't do any good to help you." Well naturally you'd think you were an idiot. You're worthless, just something that your mother gave birth to and you're just put out in this world and you're going to survive the best way that you can.

Another informant recalled the insecurity his mother instilled in him:

She kind of gave me the feeling that I was retarded. I love my mom and everything, don't get me wrong there, but she didn't really help me either because she kind of gave up on me. A little kid, you shouldn't be giving up on him. When I was in grade school, she had me scared to death that I was going to be a bum when I grew up, because she would be so worried about what I was going to do when I grew up. And here I was in grade school, when most little kids don't even think about what they're going to be when they grow up. Here she had me scared to death that I'd never make it in life.

It is difficult for illiterates to maintain the son/daughter role in adult life when confronted with these childhood feelings and memories of how their parents poorly performed their parental roles. The illiterates in this situation are hard pressed to display warm feelings and respect for their own family.

Marriage. Courtship and marriage represent a major problem in the establishment of intimate relationships, involving first a potential spouse and, secondly, the spouse's family. For il-
literates, all stages of the marriage process require careful attention to management of the stigmatizing identity. They never know beforehand how a potential spouse or family member will react, and therefore they must cautiously negotiate their discovery and disclosure to others.

In courtship, the first step in identity management is deciding the appropriate time to disclose one's illiteracy to potential spouses. Some persons reported being honest and open from the beginning of the relationship. When asked if a spouse knew of their illiteracy, respondents gave comments such as these:

My wife always knew. Yeah, she knew my problem before we was even married. That's an embarrassment that I had to go through way back then. And it is, it's awfully hard to tell a girlfriend.

* * * * * * * *
Oh yeah, I explained it to her. I explained it to her from the first time I met her. That's one thing, I am pretty reasonable. I don't like to lie to somebody. That's the way I mostly worked it.

Early disclosure is not without risk as it can lead to termination of the relationship. One man mentioned being "hurt" by early disclosure, but nevertheless described late disclosure as more painful:

Like all the other girls I went with—they'd just say, "Oh?" Couple of days I'd wait and they wouldn't speak. There's one down in Somers kind of hurt me doing that. I told her and the next day I asked her for a date again. And she goes, "No, I gotta do something." I asked her next week, but finally I just forgot about her. I couldn't forget about her, but it hurt. See, if I hadn't told her and she found out later, I'd of been in more trouble and I'd been hurt worse, so I just had to tell her.

The concealment can be continued into a marriage, however.
A wife said she did not learn of her husband's illiteracy until long into the relationship when a situational confrontation occurred that forced his disclosure:

When I first met Harry I would never have known. I mean it takes awhile. I don't go around looking for defects either. Most people don't. I just would have never known unless he, I mean by now, yeah, but I handed him things to read and he'd look at it. I thought well he read it. And he'd give it back to me smiling. When I first found out, see I really felt silly because it was about, we were together for about a month. It was pepper, "Hand me the pepper," or something. I screamed at him. I called him a dummy. He finally told me, he says, "Well I can't read." You see, the reason he didn't want to tell me he couldn't read was because he felt that I wouldn't want to be with him, that I would think he was less of a man. That was a complex he has had.

Marriage and new family membership brings the eventual need to tell the in-laws that a spouse is illiterate. Identity management becomes problematic because some relatives will know and will participate in the secret, but others will not know. The uncomfortable situation in which several family members keep the secret from another member was described by a wife as a major reason for her husband to engage in full disclosure:

I feel that he should tell people. He should let people know that he can't read. It's not quite as awkward. Like when we're up at grandma's and they're opening the presents. Dad goes, "Here, you read this, Bob." Bob's sitting there, and mom rescues him. She says, "I'll read it." You see, grandma didn't know that Bob couldn't read yet. Things like that, it's awkward because if people know then they don't have to put him into that kind of embarrassing situation where maybe there is somebody in the group that he don't want to know. That's why I think he should tell. He shouldn't have to be embarrassed about it, it's not a sin.

The situation of telling an in-law is characterized by the illiterate's uneasiness and reluctance and the in-law's emotional
reaction combined with a strong desire to help the individual.

The following two accounts are typical:

My mom, she wasn't really sure about Tom at first. She was a little bit afraid of him because she knew something was wrong, something was different about him. He finally sat down and talked with her about it, and she really tried to help him. You just don't think that your family would turn against you, with a person you love like that, and they call you down for living with somebody like that. You don't think it would really matter that much, but it does.

* * * * * *

When we were first going together, the only person we were scared to tell was my mother because I didn't know how she'd react. When she found out, though, that he couldn't read, she cried. She felt sorry for him. She was really upset, and she just wanted to help him learn. She's just that kind of person. But I didn't know how she was going to handle it.

The helping reaction in particular can be stressful when illiterates interpret such behavior as inhibiting their independence by "overhelping." Some expressed resentment for helping acts they felt were insincere. An instance of in-laws' helping too much is:

It's awfully hard to hide things like that from your immediate family or relatives. You take your in-laws, now there's been a lot of times when we get together, like a family reunion and stuff like that. We play different games. Like there'd be certain games where you have to read and write. They're always making excuses when it comes around to your turn. I mean they're actually telling you, "Well, he can't do that well, we'll take it easy on him." When they get around to your turn, there's kind of a guessing part of something. And they always try to make it as easy as they can for you to guess it. Like you're a complete idiot.

Another reaction commonly attributed to in-laws is gentle ridicule or teasing, and conflict occurs here even though the illiterate recognizes the statements as amicable. Any remarks
can cause hurt and anxiety for the illiterate:

Her mom, I know she's kidding but she'll go, "Read that, you big dummy," or something like that. I just sit there and get a little irritated a bit. But I think awhile, that she's only kidding. I think, but I know she is. Anyway, she goes, "How's the big dummy?" I go, "Oh, alright." After awhile she gets the hang of it, I don't really like that.

The family provides its members with a source of identity. Through interaction with one's family members and intimate friends a person gains a sense of ego and pride. One woman described this experience:

My husband was disappointed in me. No one in my whole life has ever been proud of me. My mother wasn't proud of me, my father loved me but he wasn't proud of me. I don't know anywhere in my life that somebody's been proud of me. And this is something I've wanted more than anything in the world is pride. I didn't want too much pride, but enough for him to say, "This is my wife!" not (sounding disgusted) "This is my wife." There's a difference.

The illiterate is not alone in facing the lack of pride and identity; other family members encounter this conflict also. One couple gave an account of tension and the near breakup of their relationship because of the illiterate's lack of ego:

Girlfriend: When I first met Kit he didn't have any ego at all. It was kind of hard once, because it was at a family reunion and it was meet everyone at once. He and I almost broke up right after the reunion because he just didn't have an ego at all. He didn't act like a man, he didn't act like he had any pride in himself.

Boyfriend: Her brother's an electrical engineer. He was really putting me down. And the more he put me down, he'd just look at me like I was a nobody.

Girlfriend: He asked me what I was doing with him because I made straight A's through school. It was just that Kit didn't act like a man. My brother knew that something was wrong with him. We left right after that, then we went home and had a big fight. And I said, "You're either going to have to shape up or I'm going to ship out."
The ego problem is also found in a statement made by one man describing his dislike of false ego-building by his relatives. Knowing that he cannot read, the in-laws often try to emphasize to him and others his special knowledge and skills in nonliterate fields. The illiterate, however, sees this talk as distasteful flattery:

I've tried spelling games with my mother-in-law, and she was really amazed that I'd even have the nerve to try it. She marveled over it, "Got to hand it to you, you can't read or write but yet you're right in there trying." That don't make a person feel very good. Or when you do something good, like scuba diving. That always amazed them because they couldn't figure out how in the world did he get the knowledge, how did he learn about that. When they do something like that and they get together and talk about it, man they just put you on a pedestal, build you way up. You know it's a bunch of garbage. I don't like it at all.

One spouse's illiteracy creates a myriad of practical everyday problems for both marriage partners. The literate spouse accomplishes all routine literacy matters for the couple and is continually available to help the dependent, illiterate spouse. Because of the additional tasks and obligations imposed on the literate spouse, the other's illiteracy is a source of potential conflict within the marriage and a further problematic endeavor. For the illiterate, on the other hand, a spouse's literacy is also conflictual and problematic. Writing letters, reading newspapers and books, or playing games are activities performed by the literate spouse which exclude the illiterate, who must learn to cope with the exclusion. The following account shows how a wife's literacy was unsettling to the illiterate husband,
At first he was very jealous because I love to read at night before I go to sleep. He'd be very jealous and throw fits, and make me feel awful. And I told him, "Well, it's your own fault. You could try and learn how to read. You could ask me." And that was the only thing that ever happened between us about his reading, was that, his getting jealous.

Clearly, her attitudes toward marriage demonstrate the uncertain familial membership and relationship. One person adhered to a prohibitive viewpoint regarding marriage and illiteracy. He expressed a sense of personal deficiency and said that illiteracy had prevented him, by his choice, from getting married. Only when he began to attend remedial education classes and learn to read did he consider himself marriageable:

I think if I wouldn't of went back to school I know I wouldn't of got married because I would of been too embarrassed or ashamed to have a wife like I got. And she is really a wonderful person. I'd feel embarrassed and ashamed to meet some of the people she meets. Now, I can sit down and I can hold a halfway conversation on them.

Another respondent said he felt uneasy about his marriage of 15 years because his wife had come to "outclass" him. His wife began working outside the home and was exposed to greater activities and challenges and learned new ways. The illiterate felt caught in a traditional role and finds his wife's new changes difficult to accept. As he recalled:

Now she's realized that life is a heck of a lot more than just staying home and changing diapers. So now she wants to see the world. Which is fine, but to about three years ago I was the boss of the family. I did it the way I knew, which was the way my mother and father taught me, and the things I learned by myself. That was all find and dandy, it was kind of an oldfashioned way. But now she's learned so much more that she's outclassed me. I don't know if she realizes it or not, but I feel it everyday. I'm not in the same
bracket as what she is.

**Children:** In addition to being husband/wife, illiterates become father/mother with the arrival of children. New responsibilities fall to the parents, and the impacts of illiteracy on family relations multiply. Informants were keenly aware of how their illiteracy hampered their carrying out typical parental responsibilities.

The illiterate women interviewed placed themselves in traditional housewife-mother roles and stressed literacy as essential for competent role-playing. Literacy tasks required of a competent housewife, mother, and wife include managing family finances, cooking, and sewing:

Not being able to write checks is really something. He knew I couldn't read, so he gave me cash. And I could never handle the books. And you know a woman usually does handle books.

* * * * *

Now every woman reads recipes. My mother-in-law, she knew right away I couldn't read, so she taught me by taste. I remember in one year I learned all my cooking by taste instead of using recipes. I never knew about halves and quarters. I couldn't read a measuring cup.

* * * * *

I can do embroidery, I can sew really good. And I did not go by a pattern. My mother helped me a lot. She would take a newspaper cut-out which she wanted to make, just a newspaper. Put it on there and cut it out and you've got it. That's how I sew. I don't sew by pattern because I can't read the pattern.

One woman summarized her role deficiencies in this way:

Marriage is a hard thing, and I think that if you can't read and spell and do these things, if he can and you can't, then you immediately put all the weight on him.
It comes out you're stupid more and more often. Pretty soon you're flinching at every left and right for things, cause you're taking him more papers home to sign. He's got to read all the girl scout stuff, and I've got four daughters. He's doing all the stuff the mother should be doing. It's just too much for the man, it's too much for him to have to handle all these things and work and help me buy the groceries. He might as well not have a wife. So it sort of developed throughout, it's just like a big ball. The reading, you must know how to read, subtract, multiply, divide to be a wife. To be a mother, you have to know all these things.

For men in traditional family roles, literacy is associated more with occupational tasks. At home, literacy is used in reading instructions to assemble or repair toys and household articles. Generally, illiterate men listed literacy tasks which either parent might perform, a finding which suggests that there are not many literacy activities specific to the husband/father roles. It may be easier to be an illiterate father than to be an illiterate mother. Reading stories to children and helping with learning and schoolwork were often mentioned by men as their role activities. One man had recently married a woman with two children and suddenly found himself in the father role with its demands:

Well, I just recently got married. It's ordinary to have a family, you're going to have to sit down, and kids love to hear stories being read to them. And once you just can't sit back and say, "Well, they're not my kids but I love them." They come up and want you to read a storybook or something. I was a very poor reader. He did come up and ask me to read stories. And I actually couldn't read to them because I couldn't make out the words.

All fathers should answer questions and help children with homework, an activity which promotes learning and parent-child intimacy. One man described his inability to help as a lack
of attention to his children:

I've got four daughters, and when they was in the third grade they was actually smarter than I was as far as reading and bookwork. So how are you going to help them? I'd help them as much as I could. That's one thing that I found, just in the last couple of years that really bothered me, was that they thought I'd never take enough interest in their homework or their bookwork or anything like that, to help them. That really bothers me.

Another man told of learning excuses instead of reading, and expressed concern that his illiteracy might be passed on to his children in a similar pattern. He stated:

If my boy's got to ask some other student or he goes to some other parents' house and says, "Would you help me?"...Say he's in another person's house and the father happens to say, "Well son, can't you get your dad to help you over there, or your mom?" Most kids love their parents, they don't want to say well my dad or my mom can't read, so they start making up excuses right there for their dad and mom. They find out that that's the easy way out of it. So the older they get they find that making up excuses is better than reading. I did it, I made excuses.

The role of parent or guardian includes a legal dimension. Our laws dictate parental responsibility for a child's care and well-being. Literacy has become important for the accomplishment of this responsibility. For example, parents are asked to read, understand, and sign a child's school forms and medical records. One parent found the legal responsibility to be very problematic in this account:

My daughter was in special ed. I had to sign all doctor forms saying they could go to the doctor and check on her, and sign forms saying they could check her ears. All these forms had to be signed. They had to be read first so I knew what they were doing. Then as she progressed, things had to, they would write on there how she was doing, what I had to help her with. I couldn't read any of that stuff.
Literacy was also mentioned as an important skill for both parental roles because it prevents parents and children from suffering a stigma and facilitates parental authority and children's respect. Illiterate parents may suffer a loss of authority over their children. One mother told of her daughter's reaction upon realizing her mother was illiterate:

My daughter found out in a hurry. She was going to first grade. And she'd come home from school and ask me to help her. I'd send her to her dad, say, "Now let your dad help you." Then one day she just realized I couldn't read. She just said, "I don't have to mind you anymore, you're stupid. My mommy's stupid." And that killed me, it just killed me.

Another mother stressed a desire for her husband to learn to read and stated her fear that her infant son might someday suffer the stigma through familial association:

Especially I hope that he can read better before Jimmy's able to, because then there could be some hurt. I'm not trying to foresee anything, but what if Jimmy says, "Daddy, will you read this to me?" And he says, "I can't." What I mean is the kids are liable to say something to Jimmy, say, "Your daddy's stupid." You know, it'd cause a lot of problems. And that's why I want him to learn now.

The parent-child relationship suffers when the parent cannot read. Our society expects parents to competently perform certain everyday duties, yet these duties often require a high level of literacy. The illiterate parents inadequately perform their roles and experience diminished membership within their own family.

FRIENDSHIP

Another type of problematic intimate relation for an il-
literate is friendship. A close friend is one who accepts a person without caring about his level of literacy and is willing to help him. Few real friendships were reported by the respondents. This exchange between husband and wife discusses the paucity of close friends:

Wife: But when you think you have a close friend who finds out that you can't read or something like that, they think there's something wrong with you. You don't have very many friends, they weren't friends anyway. But at least it was somebody to talk to. What do you do? Wasn't John your only friend that knew?

Husband: Yeah. I always do have problems like that, but after awhile it doesn't bother you because you start to think, if somebody really is your friend he's not going to care.

Friendships are avoided to prevent being discovered and embarrassed. As a relationship grows more intimate the chances rise of a situation occurring which will expose the individual for what he is. A similar fear is that most persons will not understand the individual's problem and will react negatively or cause embarrassment. The following story shows the illiterate's overall avoidance of friendships:

I've been around so many different people because of my problem I had to just sort of slack off. You see someone for so long and they start getting to know parts about you. Like when you read, you know someone for so long. Then when it gets to questioning why you do this, why you do that, it's sometimes easier to just ignore the person, just go away from them, than try to tell them the problem. I've seen a lot of people that I've known and I just had to back off, I don't know if they could handle my telling them that I couldn't read. I just figure they're going to be close-minded about it.

It is difficult for an illiterate to maintain sufficient distance during friendship so that concealment remains possible.
One woman described the practical accomplishment of distance in a friendship:

I've got one friend, she's really nosey and she's always prodding me into doing stuff that I really don't like doing. She'd be the first one to tell that I couldn't read something. And I always kind of stayed clear of books and everything around her. She was always getting me to sew something for her cause she couldn't sew. She was "book," you know, she could really read good. If it was a pattern that I didn't understand, I'd say, "Well I don't understand this pattern, would you read it to me. Maybe I could understand it better if you read it." So I really worked them. You really find ways to work people.

At a less intimate level is the "gang" or "crowd," an informal group of friends and acquaintances. An illiterate has difficulty feeling comfortable and feeling that he belongs to the group during natural group activities and events. At this level illiteracy causes a broad inability to actively and competently participate. One individual stated:

There's six of us that chum around quite a bit, three different families. We play poker and cards quite a bit together, and we go out dancing and things. It's awfully hard for me to join in the crowd, even though my wife's there. I mean she can sit there and joke with them and everything all night. Here I am, the quiet one. You just don't have that much to say. I mean you'd love to join in and be a part of the crowd. If for some reason you're feeling extra good, a little extra peppy, then you can lead the crowd, more or less be the center of the crowd. Man I mean everything's great. But they're going along with you. If you have to go along with them, forget it.

Another said he could "fit in" only during instances of high activity on his part, when he controls the interaction. During group or mutual involvement he does not fit in:

Sometimes when certain things are going right, and you feel good inside, why I mean you can fit right in. You joke with them and everything. You get in there
and you're about three times as lively as what you normally are. And they're actually going with you, you're not going with them. That's when you fit in.

Literacy is thus a requisite part of the accomplishment of "fitting in" during social activities when membership is displayed. The next account illustrates an instance of fitting in at a party and the individual's attempts to accomplish full participation without literacy:

At work they'd have a Christmas party. They had a lot of people that worked in the office down there. I'd go out there amongst the guys, where they were talking all this shop talk, I didn't know anything about it. Or they flipped the paper out on you and said, "Here, Gary, read this." And then you'd look at it, fold it up, stick it in your pocket or lay it down someplace. Then maybe somebody'd come along and say, "Well, what did you think of that?" You couldn't tell them because you didn't know. So you have to say, "Well I didn't read it. I just got tied up, and I had to go mix drinks, or I had to go here." I'd make an excuse, like I'd be invited someplace, and they'd get into something that I knew I couldn't do, I'd make an excuse. But I couldn't do it because I was embarrassed and ashamed of it.

ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Only three instances were described of membership or involvement in formal organizations, including a church, labor union, and weight watchers' club. In each case the person's illiteracy limited participation in organizational activities. At church, social participation prevailed over religious participation, where doctrine and ritual are largely written in hymn books and the Bible. The inability to adequately read pamphlets and record one's daily diet and calorie intake produced an inactive membership in the weight watchers' club. The informant who mentioned participation in his labor union at one
time was an elected representative. His position demanded literacy skills he could not provide, yet he did manage to sustain participation without literacy, as his account shows:

I could of been a shopster three different times. I tried it once. I was a shopster in the mines in Garrison. And I had such a hassle, I could never take notes at the meeting or anything. I had to remember everything. I'd go home and I'd have my wife write it down. One time we was getting ready for the strike and they gave me the job of making up the posters, the cards. So I got the idea of what they wanted on the cards and everything, pretended like I was writing it down on the book. Went back home and my wife made the cards. She made the first one and I copied the rest of them.

Generally, organizational membership is nonexistent for illiterates in this research. The informants do not seek these memberships because, as one person said, "I feel a lot more relaxed away from people. I have a little bit of trouble being around people, I just feel uncomfortable around people." When an individual did belong to a club or organization his participation was minimal or limited both directly because he could not participate in the written aspects, and indirectly because he feared embarrassment and exposure as a stigmatized individual.

WRITTEN RELATIONS

In Western Civilization for centuries it has been a common practice to begin and end, develop and sustain everyday intimate relations through writing. Intimacy is created through love letters and advertisements soliciting potential mates and terminated through "Dear John" letters or suicide notes. Despite the advent of the telephone, letter writing remains a major means of personal communication and interaction, yet for
illiterates it is available only with great difficulty. As citizens of a literate society, they have an address which entitles them to receive mail; they are "postal patrons." They cannot, however, manage their mail correspondence, reading what they receive or writing responses.

In many types of relationships, it is accepted as natural, if not expected, that persons will maintain their relations through letter writing. It is a taken for granted activity to write or read letters, to receive mail. For many illiterates it is a problematic enterprise never accomplished. For adults in remedial education, writing a letter is often cited as an important event meaningful for both persons in the relationship:

I wrote my mom my first letter, and I'm 36 years old. I wrote her the first letter about three months after I started school down here. My mom wrote back and said, "Boy, are you sick?" Because I explained to her, I told her I went back to school. And my mom was really impressed. I told her I went back to school and I was improving and everything. I said that I really enjoyed it and I said that even though I am 36 years old I'm still going to make you proud of me, one way or the other.

For illiterates, letter writing is certain to result in discovery as being someone without basic literacy skills. Letters are written only to the "wise," those who know of the handicap and are trusted to respond positively. Without fear of social repercussions, the illiterates may feel free to expose their deficiency in a letter. Pictures, misspellings, and any unorthodox letter writing technique that works is acceptable. One person gave this account of his letter writing:

I don't like letters. When one of my friends was
logging over at Seeley-Swan, he wrote to me and my mom helped me out to write back to him. Some of the words I misspelled. He knew I couldn't read or spell that good. Kind of shocked him when he got a letter from me. When I wrote, I always drew pictures on it too. Like if I went fishing and caught a fish so big, I'd put a guy with a fishing pole. Just to tell him about it.

Letters are expected to contain personal communication and display individual traits of the writer. When the help of another is required, the written expression of an illiterate's individualness is problematic. Two aspects of a letter displaying the personal or individual traits are handwriting and tone of speech. Normally, letters are handwritten solely by the writer in his usual mode of expression; another person's presence makes the illiterate's letter "different." One person described this dilemma:

Mom'd write them down on a piece of paper and I'd just copy them off it. Sometimes I give her the pen and she writes it while I say it. Then I send it that way and he knew I didn't write it because my mom writes twice as better than I do. After awhile he didn't care, he knew I was talking though, cause I don't think my mom goes out and fixes a car, or goes to town and gets drunk.

Our society commonly uses cards to express personal sentiments. Cards are exchanged on holidays and special occasions and relate an emotional message which the sender wishes to express in written form, not orally. Considerable meaning is given to the message, and the receiver is expected to understand the meaning. Illiterates cannot understand either the card's inscribed message or the sender's writing, so card-giving becomes meaningless. When one husband was finally able to read a
card, his wife noted it:

Before when I'd give him a card, he just wouldn't read it. Now in fact the last card I got him he read it all the way through. I didn't have to help him one bit. That was very rewarding to me and to him. To other people it would seem like no big deal. Interaction through letter writing is difficult if not impossible for illiterates. They receive mail, but without literacy they cannot participate in this membership practice.

SUMMARY

The main characteristic of an illiterate's intimate relations is dependence, and the ensuing struggle for individuality and independence creates conflict for those relations. In the family of origin it may be untenable to maintain intimate relations because of past memories and feelings toward a parent's behaviors that can be interpreted as a lack of affection or withheld support. Courtship and marriage bring new relations with potential spouses and eventually with the spouse's family. The in-law family presents the illiterate with problematic situations of disclosure. Since discovery is inevitable, identity management is carefully conducted to avoid hurtful or damaging relations. Familial relations reflect back on the illiterate a sense of inadequacy, of low self-esteem, pride, and ego. The spouse's literacy can act to exclude the individual from participation in "couple" activities. Family roles of mother/wife or husband/father are affected by the individual's illiteracy, preventing the full accomplishment of necessary duties and obligations inherent in each role. The housewife
role seems to require more literacy than male roles do. Relations with children were of particular concern to the informants, who stressed reading stories and helping with schoolwork as important parental responsibilities.

Other relationships discussed in the chapter were friendships and organizational membership. In both cases illiterates were found to have limited or partial participation and involvement. In informal groups of friends the illiterate cannot converse or display competent friendship behavior. Clubs and organizations have some form of literacy usually associated with their activities, and this barrier subtly keeps illiterates from actually participating and from desiring to participate if they could. During everyday ongoing organized group activities and interaction they do not feel the member's sense of belonging to that group, they do not "fit in."

In general, illiteracy acts to reduce an individual's participation and involvement in social life by creating marginal or incomplete social relationships with other people. Any social relation is hampered by the inability to talk adequately with one another, so the next chapter describes the illiterate's conversational participation.
CHAPTER 4

LITERACY TALK: THE ILLITERATE IN CONVERSATIONS

Membership has been described as the possession and display of competencies in natural settings (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:213). The major competency of membership is said to be the ability to use language (Gumperz and Hymes, 1972). Language exists in two forms, written and oral, and the concept of membership must employ both forms. Just as conversation (oral language) is a membership practice, so is reading (written language) also a membership practice. The inability to read and enjoy membership through the written mode also impairs a person's ability to converse and display oral membership. This chapter describes how normal conversational activity among members is restrictive for individuals who are illiterate. Membership is limited on two accounts: an individual's inadequate oral language and his inept participation in conversations. Some sociological implications of the reading/conversing dilemma will also be considered.

The concept of natural conversation will be used in this chapter and refers to "a kind of mutual talking that can and does go on under any and all circumstances in our society" (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:342). As a type of oral language, natural conversation is an ongoing everyday organized activity in which members participate and thereby gain and display membership. Natural conversation is an important oral membership practice and a problematic activity for illiterates.
ORAL LANGUAGE

Since the written language of an illiterate is negligible, his everyday language for all practical purposes is exclusively oral. Illiterates and their spouses and teachers all regard this language as inadequate in several respects. First, they noted the illiterate's vocabulary is smaller or different. The number or words understood and used by the illiterate is less; illiterates say they "don't know as many words" as literates do. The literate's words tend to be longer, more complex or technical in nature. Of the vocabulary that literates and illiterates hold in common, the literates know more meanings to the words and can thus use words in ways not readily understood by illiterates. A typical statement is:

Bigger words is part of it. I wouldn't say just bigger words, but different meanings to the words. It's really hard to explain because, well, it seems like they know more meanings to the words, to a word, than what I do. A word might have two or three different meanings, even three or four, depending on the way you use it. I might know one or two. And it's really hard.

Besides words, two illiterates mentioned that their working vocabulary did not include phrases, sayings, or poems which literates have available to them. The following account illustrates the importance of "little sayings" as part of a member's oral repertoire:

One thing that makes up a person's character is different little sayings and poems, things like that that you've read. I don't know about you, but myself I can't remember them things. A joke and stuff like that, I can remember them, but as far as some sort of saying or a little poem, I don't have anything like
that in my character. I realize it kind of makes a
colder type character. But you might think well
crud, why don't he remember a bunch of poems and
things to say when you're in a group of people so that
you can feel like part of them. Well for me it's not
that easy.

Illiterates also commented that the language they use is
not what literates use, and such statements suggest that illit­
erates do not perceive themselves as members of their own every­
day speech community. Accounts in which this idea was expressed
show an unfamiliarity particularly for technical or scientific
words which are introduced to members' oral vocabulary primarily
through writing. The oral repertoire of our society is becoming
increasingly sophisticated through the spread of technological
jargon within the vocabulary of the general population. Literacy
and technology create the means and reasons for major language
changes yet these changes are effectively hidden from illiterates.
The following account provides a description of being an out­
sider in a changing speech community:

That really amazes me, is some of the words that they
come up with. I mean it's everybody that reads a book
and things. They use words, I mean they don't even
use the same language that I do. I'm still using the
same language that I've learned probably when I was
about 16 years old. And all the new words and stuff
that they've learned, they know the meanings to them.
Even my youngest daughter knows words that I don't
know the meaning of. They're learning about different
planets and things, the distance between them, how fast
it takes light to travel, all kinds of things that I've
never learned before. Boy, I mean to tell you if that
don't make you feel like you've really been left out,
you've got another thing coming.

CONVERSING

The contrast between oral and written language is not meant
to create two separate forms. Rather, each form overlaps and exists within its opposite. The oral form commonly exists in writing as quotations, and punctuation rules clearly distinguish written talk from other writing. Similarly, written language exists in oral form; writing becomes oral through pronouncement, by "reading aloud." Another combination of oral and written language is more pervasive: the "talk about" what has previously been "read about." For illiterates, talk about written subjects occurs after they hear about it in conversations among informed literates. Illiterates learn about writing orally, and this process is second-hand, incomplete, and confusing.

This "talk about" what is written is an important feature of natural conversation in which illiterates are excluded. Literacy and written language influence conversation in several ways. First, writing provides topics which commonly occur in natural conversation. People ordinarily talk about what they read about. Reading about a certain topic in written media makes it a current topic about which other people will share an interest or familiarity. Recurring topics in writing are repeat topics of conversation. As one person said:

To sit down and really carry out a conversation with the average person is almost impossible. You just don't have that much to talk about. Lot of these guys, they've always got something to say. I mean when there's a low in the conversation, in a party or something, in a group of people. Why, then they bring up something. I don't know where they get all this stuff that they say, but they've always got something to say.

Listening and overhearing the conversations of others is the primary means of learning information and topics. Armed with
this literate knowledge the illiterate is capable of conversing, as this account explains:

I can't really communicate with other people 'cause they go by what they read in the newspapers. That's what they talk about. I sit there and somebody like you and somebody else was sitting over there in a corner and I overheard you, I could talk to somebody else about the same thing you guys did. That's about the only way I could ever talk to somebody.

Besides providing topics, knowledge of the written enables one to express himself, to present ideas and feelings to fellow members. Opinions on everyday issues can be formulated and related in conversations. As one man stated, "If you can't read about it, you can't express an opinion because you don't know anything about it." One person found that illiteracy limits the number of opinions or positions a person can know about an issue and facilitates the creation of a person's own response:

One thing is you can express your own true feelings. See, you can't pick up a book and read four different ideas of why you should take birth control because you can't read it. You just got to figure out why. You come up with your own philosophy.

Another comment was that literacy structures a person's speech into a form more "interesting" to others. Speech intonation and the manner of presentation are acquired from reading, and without these skills the person's speech is thought to limit participation in conversation:

One thing that bothers me, when you read then you learn a pattern of speech. You know how to put the right emphases on certain words. And it makes your sentence or story or whatever your speech is, more interesting.

The conversation abilities of illiterates are impaired be-
cause of their inadequate vocabulary and language, their lack of topics and things to say. An illiterate's conversation could be distinguished from a literate's conversation, and the difference has been described along a vertical dimension. One person noted that natural conversation occurs in levels:

As far as not knowing what those people are talking about and everything, it's not that. It's carrying on the same conversation at the same level as they are, and that's what's hard. You feel like you're so much below what their level of conversation is.

Another respondent described his attempts to bridge the difference between conversation levels in this way:

My brother is a social work major, and he's got one more year to go. I go to a lot of his classes and pick up everything I can. That's where I try to learn every word I can. So if I do have to have an intellectual conversation I can come up with some real doosies for words, and know exactly what they mean.

Talk about what is written is a part of natural conversation which socially segregates literates from illiterates. The conception of literacy talk will be used to refer to verbalization of information or knowledge originally encountered through writing. Illiterates cannot really take a full membership role in conversation because they lack the ability to produce what may be termed literacy talk. When they consistently cannot engage in literacy talk their status as members is

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1 For example, the vertical dimension of natural conversation was recognized by a reading teacher who said that the interviewer would have to "talk down" to illiterate informants.

2 According to C. Wright Mills (1959:124), "A conception is an idea with empirical content."
reduced and they suffer estrangement from commonly understood social facts. Literacy talk is that conversation which one finds at the "higher" levels, while ordinary conversation and other oral language appear in lower levels.

The inability to produce literacy talk and engage in natural conversation has significant effects on other aspects of an illiterate's life. Because conversation is a major way of achieving friendship and gaining greater intimacy in any relationship, inadequate conversational skills would be expected to have an opposite effect of increasing the social distance between persons. Natural conversation with another person is a display of intimacy, and to become a poor participant in conversation can be interpreted as a deliberate refusal to converse and be "friendly." One man explained:

I think you keep your friends a little more because if you can't hold a conversation with a person, after a little while they say, "what the hell, that guy don't want to be around me, or I don't want to be around him because he acts like he don't want to be with me, and I don't want to be with him if he don't want to be with me." It's just a weird situation.

At other times the refusal to converse is deliberate. In many conversations because they cannot produce literacy talk they felt vulnerable to discovery and embarrassment. One person said the avoidance of conversation was to keep from being "put down," part of which she encouraged by her own attitude:

I think that people, even though I didn't tell

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3 Social facts are described as "features of the society that members know, discover, use, and (above all) talk about in the context of daily life" (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:214).
them I couldn't read, I think because I put out an attitude that I wasn't any good, that they picked it up and helped me not be any good. It's like you run into somebody who keeps telling you that he's stupid, or always saying, "I don't know." You're trying to stay out of conversations you're afraid of.

The inability to converse is heightened when the social status of conversants is wide apart. Acute anxiety feelings arise when the illiterate must talk to someone of high social status. One woman returned to school and was able to get work as a maid for doctors and lawyers, but without her schooling she felt she "could never talk to these people much less work for them." Another person told of his fear of being ridiculed:

For a long time I couldn't talk to that teacher 'cause it did aggravate me that I didn't know how to talk to her. There's a lot of people I can't talk to 'cause I'm, I guess I'm afraid they're going to make fun of me, is what it is.

When attempts are made to participate in conversation, the illiterates' efforts often only demonstrate their oral inabilities and end in frustration, embarrassment, and further estrangement. The adverse reactions of other conversants show the illiterates that they have not really been conversing as members:

For years and years and years I've had a lot of trouble with that. I'd have something really interesting to tell them, at least it'd be really interesting to me. But to keep the interest of the other person or persons, I'd get half way through my story and they'd lose interest. It's not only embarrassing but it just makes you realize that they think, "Well you dummy, you don't know what you're talking about anyway."

Everyday information about current topics and social facts is also distributed through the mass media. It might be expected
that these media could provide enough information for a person
to be able to display sufficient knowledge and pass as a member
in natural conversation. According to informants, however,
the media (newspaper excluded) information is incomplete and
rudimentary. One person described the media as follows:

I think somebody that can read and reads the newspa­
papers and magazines, knows a lot more that's going
on in the world than somebody who has never read a
newspaper or hasn't read magazines and don't keep
up on a lot of current events. The radio covers a
very short, fast bit on each little subject. The
TV news is sort of the same. I know that if you
can't read newspapers and magazines it is harder to
know what's going on with a lot of different subjects.
Like magazines and my mom, she'll start talking about
some article that she read, and I've never even heard
about it. You can't pick up everything that's going
on by watching the 5 o'clock news.

Media information is insufficient for conversing about a topic.

One man told of how he talks about television topics:

I watch TV and everything, and if somebody wants to
carry on a conversation about that show while we're
watching it, that's fine. No problem. Like on the
news where they're having a war over in China or
some place like that, alright now if I try to tell
somebody about that the next day, all I can do is
tell them bits and pieces. But I can't actually tell
them enough or I can't describe what I'm trying to
tell them enough to really make it interesting to
them. So usually what I do is ask them a question,
like, "Did you hear what happened in China the other
night?" Or something of that nature. It's really
hard to handle.

A major result of inadequate conversation is the misun­
derstandings which develop between an illiterate and literate
conversants. Respondents' complaints about not being understood
were directed toward persons in their close relationships,
family and friends. The illiterates cannot understand others
in conversation, nor can they express themselves well enough to be understood. Two persons said:

Rod: How hard it is for them to understand what I'm trying to get across to them! They'll sit there, I'll say, "Well, I did that." And they'll say, "What are you talking about?"

Bob: That's the same with my wife and I. That's where we have our biggest problem, I think, is misunderstanding what each other's trying to say.

Misunderstandings also occur because literates use literacy talk and their greater language repertoire.

My girlfriend was working for a doctor. She was his receptionist. She did filing and just about everything. When she was there, she'd come home and she started using medical words, big words. And I didn't know what she was talking about. I told her to speak English, "don't be a smartass, speak English, will you?" And she'll get pissed-off and she'll start an argument just like that. Or I'll start telling her, and she'll tell me to speak English. I said, "I am, you just don't understand me." But either way it goes, I don't understand her and she doesn't understand me.

Misunderstood conversations with family members and friends often end in arguments, verbal disputes. One man described the tendency toward arguments with his wife and their increasing social distance in this account:

A lot of arguments are caused from it. We realize this, but we don't always think about it when we're discussing something. And so we just completely try to stay away from an argument, and what happens there is, I mean if you can't talk and explain something to the person, it kind of cuts out another thing you have in common. Now I find more and more all the time that I have less and less in common with my wife. My own wife. I mean we like shows and we like to dance. It's really hard to say where it's going to end because the more she learns and the more she gets out in the world, in fact she's going to college pretty soon. Myself, I can't see my future at all with this.

As in natural conversation, the illiterates are at a dis-
advantage in "arguments," which are another form of oral interaction. Poor talking skills handicap their performance in arguments to such an extent that they may often be the losers. One informant said:

I can walk in, my girlfriend will be at my house, like I'll have to go and pull the starter out of the car and rebuild it. I put it all back in the car, and it worked. I told her what I did and she didn't understand. Now then again, if I get in a fight with her, she'll turn everything around. When it comes to fighting, with words she can murder me. 'Cause I don't have the same vocabulary she does.

SUMMARY

Natural conversation is one arena in which competent membership is displayed. Illiterates are unable adequately to engage in natural conversation because they know they cannot produce literacy talk, a conversational feature of increasing importance is highly literate, technological societies. Literacy talk includes the vocabulary, popular expressions, semantics, topics, and opinions provided to members through written media. Other mass media do not make these aspects of conversation available in sufficient detail for full membership. Verbal disputes and feelings of exclusion from one's speech community are common results and contribute to the illiterate's estrangement from social life.

Natural conversation and literacy talk are major features of everyday social situations in which illiteracy occurs. The next chapter will describe these problematic situations and the practical skills that illiterates develop to accomplish them.
CHAPTER 5

ILLITERACY SKILLS IN TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Thus far, we have discussed the social participation of illiterate persons through examination of their social relationships, conversational abilities, and the need to be concealed. Attention now will center on the illiterate's practical accomplishment of "getting through the day" to show the strategies employed for occasions where literacy prevails. The present chapter provides an ethnographic description of the artful skills and problematic situations which constitute the everyday experience of being illiterate. The skills and their usage are the topics of the first two sections. Also emphasized in this chapter will be the skillful accomplishment of personal finances and on-the-job tasks.

PRACTICAL SKILLS

To cope with the inability to read, persons develop and produce a variety of artful, clever, and ingenious skills. Illiterates' practical skills have a twofold purpose, to avoid detection and to facilitate participation in ongoing social life. Skills must adequately meet both criteria to be adopted as proper and efficient methods. All informants were aware of several practical skills they use and referred to them as

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To identify the illiterate's unique methods I utilized Egon Bittner's (1967) concept of practical skills, referring to "those methods of doing certain things, and to the information that underlies the use of the methods, that practitioners themselves view as proper and efficient."
"tricks." They were found to have originated and developed the skills individually; no one reported having been taught a skill or having learned a skill through the teaching of another illiterate. Their skills thus represent individual adaptations to practical problems that are experienced by persons individually, though their personal adaptations are remarkable similar. At least for the sample of this study, illiteracy is first and foremost an individual trait and experience undergone without subcultural support or socially organized knowledge.

Many of the methodical strategies given by illiterates were actually covering devices or "excuses." The illiterate invents a special saying or response to hide the handicap and still adequately carries out the conversational involvement. Such phrases as "Could you read this, I forgot my glasses?" or "I'm in a hurry, mind if I take this form home?" are common. These excuses are skillfully adapted by the individual as effective methods for continued concealment while tactfully or deceitfully requesting help. Other concealment tactics, as

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This finding that practical skills originate independently and individually is supported for two further reasons. First, the skills described during interviews were expressed in similar and often identical phrases. Many persons spoke of "copying" and "remembering," for example. Secondly, one interview was conducted with two illiterates together, and at one point they mentioned the immediate realization that they closely share similar methods and experiences. One person in that interview said:

The things that we've been saying, I mean we have a lot in common but I didn't realize it before. We have a lot of experiences and tricks in common, but yet we have our own ways of hiding certain things too.
discussed in Chapter 2, can also be considered practical skills. However, concealment tactics have a common theme of avoidance, while the skills described here are based on active encounters and involvement with written language.

**Memory.** A practical skill all illiterates mentioned was the use of memory. Most persons felt they had developed a "good" memory. One man said he consciously forces himself to remember things:

> I remember a lot of things because, I don't know, I just more or less knew I had to. If I didn't remember, I couldn't go back and say, "Well I did this but I don't quite remember how." I think I forced myself into remembering a lot of things because I knew that I'd have to go back and do them again.

Memory skills were utilized in a variety of situations. During verbalized writing, when a written text is made oral as a person reads it aloud, it is helpful to remember as much as possible.

> You'd have them read it to you. Then you'd just remember a certain amount for questions. If somebody asked you a question, why you'd say, "Well, I didn't get that, but I can tell you the answer to this one."

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When it's something that I don't understand if somebody reads it to me I can generally come right back with it almost word for word. Somebody would read something and then I'd memorize it, and I really never learned the words myself.

Physical skills or procedures can be memorized so that reading requirements are minimized:

> I had to look, watch someone, and remember what they're doing by watching them. They'd figure, "Well if I forgot it I'll just go back and read it in a manual." I couldn't do that, I had to remember. I was watching this guy putting a car back together and I said, "You're doing that wrong." He says, "What do you mean I'm doing it wrong?" I says, "You're doing it wrong, I watched
you take it out." They couldn't figure out how I remembered it, but I had to rely on my memory.

Symbol and word recognition is another aspect of memory. An object can be remembered and recognized on later occasions when literacy is otherwise necessary.

You can't write down a list if you're going to the store to get something. Till you get it, you just got to keep it in your memory, and hope you get the right things. Like my friend who told me to get him some beer and a pack of cigarettes, the brand of cigarettes. Here I'm running this through my mind trying to remember what brand they want. You hope you get it right. You can't write it down so you just gotta remember.

**Listening.** A skill related to remembering is listening. Without written language there is a stronger emphasis on oral communication; written information can be gathered if one listens closely to the talk of others. Several informants and teachers cited attentive listening as a special skill illiterates develop. One teacher said:

Tim has learned as a result of his handicap to listen as I have never found anybody to listen. When I first became acquainted with him he would listen to me as if I were the Oracle of Delphi. It almost frightened me, because I'm not used to it. He never misses a thing. You really explain something to him and he remembers.

**Copying and Matching.** As illiterates, all informants lacked the ability independently to assimilate and construct written symbols into meaningful patterns. They could, however, re-create symbols by the physical operation of a writing instrument. In other words, they have the physical skill but not the intellectual skill to write. Physical writing skills become important substitutes for literacy. The illiterate often
accomplishes a routine or anticipated literacy task by copying the writing from a previously prepared example. One man related how he completes his daily time slip in this account:

They had a piece of paper to fill out, and the first week it was hard because I didn't know how to spell the words. Then after awhile I told her (wife) to write the words on paper, and when I got done with work I copied it all down on the slip. I think some of the guys know I can't spell very good because I always pull out the paper that she wrote down. But now I know how to spell "dry chain." I can just put "dry" and "chain" on it, 8 hours, the date I put numbers instead of the month, you know.

A similar skill is "matching." The illiterate can recognize other instances of the same written word (or group of words) as it appears in other texts. Matching was described in this story about shopping:

If they have an old package, I need that. I usually look at the first couple of letters, and then when I go to the store I look for that. I look at the words on the package. I don't really know what it says but I look at the first couple of letters. Usually if they match in my memory when I look at something, I know that's the right one. Instead of reading a word I gotta just match the letters and remember what it looks like.

Copying and matching are also used together to accomplish tasks, as this example of finding an automotive oil filter indicates:

I go into a store and they got that chart hanging on there. I can't pick out the oil filter, air filters, anything else. I'll take the one out when I replace it, copy everything down off of it, take it in. If I can't find it in the book, if I don't understand it, I'll go over and match it up on the other filter boxes.

The skills of copying and matching both require a working familiarity with the alphabet. The persons in this research all had acquired enough education to be able to identify and mani-
pulate the individual alphabetic symbols.

Pictures. Much of today's quickly encountered written material is presented in pictorial form. For the illiterates, pictures become the easiest way to understand these types of writing, so they develop a keen awareness of pictures. For example, written directions and instructions often come with illustrations or diagrams to follow:

You learn all the little tiny scribbles and stuff, to different people what they mean, and little directions and stuff. Instead of learning to read a direction by its word, you learn by the picture, even if it's a little line and an arrow pointing. You figure out what those little lines and arrows are after awhile. Most diagrams are basically the same.

Pictures occur as part of the advertisement or labeling of most products. Illiterates get information through the pictures on a menu or from canned goods labels:

As far as corn or something like your better brands, I mean people can look at a certain brand of corn, or chili. And they can almost tell what's inside of that can by the brand that's on it. Or they read the label and you know what you're getting. I have to look at the picture. If the picture don't look appetizing, I don't get it.

Another source of pictures is signs. The international effort toward standardized signs was enthusiastically endorsed by the respondents. A typical comment is the following:

Some of these corporations are starting to put emblems out now so people that can't read can figure them out. You ever see those Datsun cars? For a cigarette lighter they show a little flame. The light switch, they got a little light on it. That's just like a blind person climbing into a car and having braille for him so he can read the dashboard. It's the same thing with reading. That's why they started to put those no-left-turn signs out, those big circles with an X through it.
Numbers. Besides a familiarity with alphabetical symbols, illiterates have a familiarity with numbers. Several individuals said they had learned arithmetic and math easier and to a greater extent than they had learned literacy. Numerical labels are generally more easily understood by illiterates than are alphabetical labels. Our society often numbers objects in addition to naming them, and with these objects numerical skills can replace literacy. For example, the use of numerical skills was described for understanding street signs:

One thing nice about this town, there aren't too many names on streets. Everything's by number. That makes it nice. Except for out of town, but I can do pretty well here.

and record albums,

Have you ever come up to a pile of records, and the album covers were scattered all over the place, and records were all over the place? How do you imagine I have to cope with that? Well, I was sitting there one day, I wondered how I was going to get these records back in the right cover. So I started looking, it took me quite awhile. I was looking all over the covers. Hey, what's this number here? Go back to the albums and wow, I found out that they got the record and the album cover numbered. So I find the number on the cover and the album and match them up, and I got the record and cover I want.

Making notes. Similar to the skill of writing is the ability to produce written language which is understandable to the individual. Notes may be written using the first letter of every word:

I can write notes to myself and know exactly what they say. They're completely, I mean nobody could ever figure them out, cause I just make the first letter of every word. That can be a pain in the ass too, because then if I'm drunk or something I forgot what the hell the things are.
the individual's version of phonetic spelling,

I could write my list because you can't go to town without a list or you buy a bunch of junk and then you don't have the things you need. Well you see I write everything, like peas and corn and all that. A lot of things I spell to this day now is spelled just like it sounds. Exactly like it sounds. It's not at all right, but it sound like it's spelled, and that way I can read it.

or by a combination of words and pictures,

When she leaves me a note, sometimes she goes "I went out to the farm," you know. But she'll draw a cow and a farm. The note was fine, but it looked like a truck instead of a cow.

Another respondent said notes must be printed since other writing styles are indecipherable:

She (wife) has to print it clearly. If she prints it any other way, or if she writes cursively, I can't understand it. When you have a hard time reading you got to sound out each word. I don't like cursive writing.

Pointing. One informant reported he uses the skill of pointing. In momentary interactions the attention of others can be drawn to an object by pointing at it instead of the individual's reading and verbalizing the object's written message.

I do a lot of pointing. Like when I was younger and I went into the store, like if a new candybar came out and I wanted to try it. I'd just go, "That one there, the one with the green." I'd just say it fast. The person would grab it. Otherwise, you'd just read whatever it said.

**SITUATED ILLITERACY**

There are many routine situations and activities in which literacy is required or expected and illiteracy becomes a specific and recognizable handicap. To describe these situations,
the concept of **socially situated literacy** will be used. This concept is meant to emphasize those everyday occasions and events where written language is present as a standard feature. These situations of literacy are practically and immediately problematic for an illiterate, yet they are naturally taken for granted by literates. All literacy is social, between an author and readers along shared symbol systems; but there is a broader social context in which literacy is practiced. I wish to delineate the sociological conditions when an instance of illiteracy occurs.

Every situated instance of illiteracy involved two aspects. First is the written **text**, "any of the various forms in which a writing may exist"; secondly, there is a social **context**, "the set of circumstances of facts that surround a particular (illiteracy) event or situation" (Random House Dictionary, 1967). Skills and problems of encountering the text are different from those found in the context. In the former, the focus lies on the text itself and how to accomplish reading, while the latter has a major concern for persons around the individual and the ensuing interaction. The text/context distinction is theoretically based on the position that language use is predominantly either written or oral. However, the text and context are intimately related; when a person inadequately reads a menu or ballot, for example, the social scene in which that illiteracy occurs is also poorly accomplished.

Literacy is actually recognizable as situated language
use, as a standard feature of many social occasions. This section will distinguish the text and context, describing each through accounts of literacy situations.

ENCOUNTERING THE TEXT. A text can be anything written, varying in complexity from a one-word traffic sign to a phrase or sentence, to an entire form, pamphlet, or book. Often the text has a specific name, such as "menu," "ballot," or "phonebook," marking it as a commonly found literacy object. Different levels of involvement go into the encounter with a text. Sometimes a quick glance will determine a text's reading level as too difficult, but at other times each word or letter may be carefully scrutinized attempting to derive some meaning.

Public Signs. Public places often have signs which illiterates cannot understand. Some examples are:

I've gone into stores where usually the've got a big fancy door and you know you're not supposed to go in there. But there's a few stores that say, "employees only," but it'll look like it's part of the store. I've started to walk into places like that before. I didn't even think about it.

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Even when we go into movie theaters or something like that. He's learned to read the words like "Goodbye Girl." But before when we first started going out, he'd just say, "Where do we go? Which door do we go through?"

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Like a machine, I know what "out of order" means now, but back then most people knew what "out of order" means, I'd just never go to a machine that had paper on it, that had any kind of writing on it. Most every little kid knew how to spell "out of order," but I just didn't use it.
You walk into a place and sometimes they have the bathrooms named. Not everybody put "men" and "women." Some of them put like "cows" and "bulls" or something. That can really screw a guy up when you don't know how to read. Some guy that owns the place says, "This would be cool." So he puts it down. Some things you see and you know what it is because you see it all the time. Sometimes you just got to go by pictures.

Commercial signs and symbols become readily identifiable without literacy through media exposure and advertising, as this statement shows:

You just go by the windows, signs like Gambles or Sears. That, or when you're driving down the hotels and motels, I can pick them out pretty easy because they're flashing off and on. Some of them, like Holiday Inn, you pick them out easy too, cause you see it on TV. Just like A & W, the colors, and golden arches for McDonald's.

Labels. Labels are encountered whenever a person "goes shopping." All products and merchandise are clearly marked with contents, ingredients, or directions for use. Pictures, memory, and matching are useful skills with labels:

Getting an oil filter or an air filter, that's a little more hectic because you got to know the name of the car, what kind of car it is, the year of the car. Then you got to look on the back of the box or whatever the filter's in, look down and see what it's made for. I went and got a couple for my dad but I had to have it written down on a piece of paper. If you want a certain brand, you have to figure out the brand name. You don't cover every inch of it. You look at it, and you figure it all out like that. I got to come up, I got to look at it, every letter, every corner.

One young man who is learning to read mentioned his fascination with labels in this story:

I used to hate to go shopping before, but I enjoy it now. I go to a store, and it's like a big book because I like to read everything we go by. Everything we buy I got to read it to know what it is.
The names, the brands. Now, my big thing is I like to read cans and stuff, how to prepare stuff. Sometimes she (wife) teases me when I'm taking a can and I'm just reading away on it like it's a book.

Calendars. Numerical skills are useful in understanding and using calendars, but often a future event cannot be recorded without writing. Pictorial calendars are particularly desirable:

Well, like calendars, one kind that you've got just tells you what day and where it's at. Another thing that I notice is that when you look at a calendar sometimes they tell you what special days there are. It's really nice when they got a little picture in the corner. Turkey for Thanksgiving, stuff like that. That's the first thing I notice when I look at a calendar.

Ballots. All informants reported they rarely if ever vote, at least partly because ballots are not understandable. When they did vote, it was often for a candidate with a recognizable name:

I voted before, but I quit it altogether. When there was Kennedy and stuff like that, I knew what is was. There was "K," Kennedy, and "vote for him!" The other ones down below, whatever the issues are, I just take a wild guess at that. But some names, they show the guy and they put the name below it. So I remember what it's spelled like, and that's how I vote.

or for the "R" or "D" person,

My husband would tell me, "R" was for republican and "D" was for democrat. Since I couldn't read the words I always voted just for either the R or D, even though I couldn't figure the names or what rank he told me to vote it. But I always have voted. But I couldn't read the names to know who I was voting for, only that I stayed in the republican thing when there was a choice.

One person told of voting by random selection:

You know what I done? If I didn't know the name I just picked out the one I wanted to on the ballot sheet. And just marked my little X. I just didn't really know how to vote. I only voted twice. And I used to wouldn't go in that room by myself and try
to figure that out because it took me so long to decide what to vote. Unless I'd seen somebody's name written out or something, I wouldn't know who it was.

Phonebooks. Several persons told of being able to use the telephone. They could use the front page emergency numbers because of the pictures associated with them. This activity is possible only if the numbers are known beforehand, so the numbers are written out by someone else. One individual said he could find a name and phone number in the book by using the alphabetical listing, provided that he could match the name with a written copy:

Well I usually have them written on a piece of paper or on the wall. Usually don't use a phonebook that much. I could find something if I had to, but I'd have to have the name written down. They're alphabetical, and I can usually find it by that.

Owner's Manual. An owner's manual contains information, recommendations, instructions, or directions concerning an instrument, tool, or machine. Often these contain pictures which the illiterate can follow, but this may not always be the case. In mentioning an owner's manual, one spoke of the uncertainty his illiteracy causes when he cannot read a manual:

I bought that cassette, and I started looking through the owner's manual, find out what you're suppose to do to keep it up. I get glancing through that, and some of the stuff I couldn't read. I'm sitting there, what's this jack for, and this hole and that hole, and this switch and that button. More or less you just got to fiddle around with it to figure it out, but it's nice when you can look through a manual so you don't screw everything up. I just more of less go by ear, try things out, hope I don't use the wrong thing. You're never really sure of yourself. You just do some guesswork and hope you get it right.

Job Application. A job application is an extremely threatening
text for an illiterate. Many skills were given for tackling this problem of the application form, but if possible there is always an attempt to take the form home where help can be received in completing it. Matching and copying and word recognition are skills used for this:

I couldn't sit down and fill out a job application because I had to put down like "Interstate Exxon." I'd just have to get somebody to write it out on paper for me. They would write the name of this place out, the foreman's name. And I would just copy it off of there, onto the application. So I'd pick up the application, take it home and have my aunt and uncle help me.

* * * * *

I let my mother fill a lot of mine out. Then I've kind of figured out exactly what they'll say. I sat there, and my mother knew I couldn't read. So she sat there and she went over it with me. She read the sentence. After awhile I got to the point where I can take and get it and I can fill it out there. Hand it to them and it'd be right. But I knew what it said. I didn't have to read it, I just already knew what it said. "Physical ailments" or anything, I learned to spot a certain word in a sentence, and that way I can figure out what the sentence says.

Driver's Test. A driver's examination is another extremely threatening text. Some reported they were given the test orally and had less of a problem in passing it. Others, however, were required to take the written test, and most managed to pass.

Word recognition, numbers, and memory helped these persons pass. When I took my driver's license test I told them that I couldn't read and would they ask someone to come and help me read. They said they couldn't do it. So anyway, they gave me the test. I took my brother's book and his old test, and they told me how to do it. So many feet, I took a wild guess at why it was and I got a 97 right, shocked me to death. I couldn't read it OK, but I took a wild guess. See, it has 30, 300, 500 so many feet for when to dim the lights, like that, so I just marked it down.
Another could pass only because the test was written in big print she could see, after much studying and memorizing:

I couldn't get a driver's license either. I couldn't read the book to learn it. So that was the first miracle, getting my license. I slept with that book for a week learning it, and I knew it. And the writing, that's the whole thing. The writing was in large print on that test. It was almost a miracle cause if it wasn't I would never of been able to pass it.

These accounts show that texts are obstacles to participation. The social setting or context surrounding each text is equally problematic, as the next section describes.

**THE SOCIAL CONTEXT.** This section emphasizes the social situations in which each instance of illiteracy occurs. The presence of others becomes the immediate problem rather than the text itself. Skills to effectively get through the literacy situation involve the cooperation, help, or manipulation of others. The social context is described in terms of either a specific location or activity; in either case, other persons on the scene make the instance of literacy into a social affair. Once the presence of others is realized, the elements of shame and embarrassment are introduced. The contexts to be listed all have some form of possible embarrassment and a perceived need to conceal.

One fact in particular pervades these accounts: our literate society lacks routine procedures for dealing with illiterates and illiterate behavior. At an interactional level of analysis, there are no ready-made rules or norms to follow when an individual is unable to read. The most common immediate
reaction of others is a blank look or stare. This account describes a situation without clear social rules:

When I went and bought a skateboard, the price and everything was alright. But then the dumb thing broke. I got it at K-mart and I took it back there. The big hassle was you got to sign your name and all this. Well one of my friends he knows I can't read, so here I am asking him how to spell my phone number and all this. It's just really hard to face up to the reality that you can't read to tell them the correct information. You get to a counter, you got to sign for something and, "Uh...uh!" What do you say? You feel embarrassed all the way around because your friend doesn't know what to do, or the lady behind the counter might not know what to do, and how'll she take it? You just don't know what to expect a lot of times. It's really weird.

At an organizational level, bureaucratic procedures often do not allow illiterate behavior. The established rules governing various literacy tasks assume that persons are literate. For example, the illiterate's desire to "take it home" is at odds with the rules for using absentee ballots:

I got in a big fight with them down at the courthouse, and didn't vote. I signed up, and see you can get an absentee ballot. They wouldn't give me one because I wan't out of town and I wasn't sick. I said, "Look it, lady, I can't read." And she says, "Well I'll come over and help you." "Listen, nobody of you ain't going to come over to help me because you don't know who the hell I want to vote for." She says, "Why don't you bring your father down here?" And I said, "Cause my father's always working, that's why. Why don't you just give me one of them, and I'll go home and I'll figure out who I want to vote for, and then I'll bring it back." She says, "That's against the law." I said, "Now tell me why it's against the law for me to take something home." She goes, "You're not out of town." I said, "Yeah, I'm out to lunch. Give me one." And she said, "No, I'm sorry, I can't give you one." So, you see how society pushes you?

Instances of illiteracy occur in situations of ill-defined norms when routine expectations of literacy do not apply.
Movies. The use of writing in foreign or silent films excludes the illiterate from understanding the dialogue, as this person said:

That gets pretty monotonous sitting there, "Well what are they saying now?" I had one where they had a little but of that. You don't catch much of the movie when they start this talk running in there. They rattle it off in another language and it's going across the bottom of the screen. Now what do I do? My friend says, "Wasn't that neat when he said that?" "He did?"

Restaurants. In a restaurant the routine procedure is to read a menu and place an order with the waiter or waitress. Without literacy, this situation can be poorly managed and embarrassing to the individual:

I go on trips with my family. My mom, she'd get really annoyed because when I'm traveling I don't like to go in to eat very much. And she never understood this, and she'd always want me to order something. I was going to tell her, "Well read the menu to me." And here she is, reading it to me, and I'm sitting here like a dunce. What do I do now? Didn't sound that appetizing at the time, when someone else's reading it and you're sitting around embarrassed and everything.

Informants told of using several skills, such as always ordering a standard item or ordering the same thing as other persons do:

If you can't read the menu, why you just say, well, somebody beside you orders this. Well you don't know what it is, and he might enjoy it. It might be the worst thing you ever eat in your life. You order and say, "Well, I'll have the same." I've done a lot of that. Also, I've ordered just one thing, hamburger steak. Most places handle hamburger steaks, or hot beef sandwich, or chicken.

In "ordering" situations, a common conversational topic is the food available on the menu. On person said he is able to order by listening to this talk:
I'd always wait for everyone to order. You know how in a fancy restaurant, this is what really helped me out. Every fancy restaurant, if you ever noticed, before anyone orders, everybody's talking about what to order. You listen to what everyone wants to order, and you pick what sounds good. You will go with a bunch of people, and if you can't read you will always be able to pick something because this never fails, you always talk before you order.

Directions. Situations of giving or following directions to a destination can be difficult for illiterates. To take a trip, one must read and follow maps and road signs and recognize city names, which some said they could poorly do. One person described his inability to give directions in this way:

When someone comes up asking where's this street, I know where it is, but I don't know what the name of it is. I lived in Missoula all my life, and I know my way around by here. But when someone asks you, "Well where is this street?", never heard of it. I never knew the street's name. It's really hard... I can get around by myself, but try to tell somebody else how to get around is something else. It's really sticky sometimes when somebody comes up, "Well how do you get here or there?" I just say, "Uh, you got me!"

Filling Out Forms. If possible, illiterates will take forms and applications home to be completed with the assistance of supportive others. At times this is not possible and illiteracy situations arise. One employment office was described as requiring its applications to be filled out in the office, as a subtle and quick check of candidates' literacy:

A lot of times I'd go into a place and ask if I could just take an application home. A couple of times they would tell me, "Well, just start writing it." They wouldn't let me take it home because then I could have somebody help me with it. There were a couple of places that didn't even talk to me, they just said, "Well, we don't need you." Get out, you know. That's kind of hard for your ego. When they just throw you out before they even talk to you, and here you are trying to fill
One's illiteracy may of necessity be revealed to a secretary, clerk, or other person who will then help fill out the form. All individuals described this situation as painfully embarrassing:

There are times you can't bring something home and have somebody else sign it. I had my arm burned, and I went to the hospital. You have to sign a bunch of stuff to get in and everything. And you can't go home and have somebody sign and then go back to the emergency ward. There are times that you have to read. Whoever's at the desk just looks at you like you're some kind of idiot, and you try and crawl away into some little corner and hide. That's all you can do in a case like that, it makes it hard for somebody.

Various excuses can also be employed. Once tactic a person mentioned is to request help because of an inability to write. The lack of writing skills can be an effective, less stigmatizing substitute for illiteracy:

Usually when I go to fill out a form, I write my name and that. And I tell them it would probably be quicker for them to do it, because I can't write that well. Like every time you want to buy shells for a rifle you have to fill out the form. You look at it and what are you suppose to put where? I just tell them it'd be quicker if you did it. If you tell somebody that you can't write that well, they figure well maybe you got a nervous problem, or you just can't write or something. They don't question you too much. I found it's easier sometimes.

Hospitals. As mentioned above, hospitals and other medical settings often entail literacy situations with such texts as magazines, insurance and admission forms, charts, prescriptions, and medical histories. One man said:
You go to a doctor anymore and you have to sign a great big thing of everything about you. That's pretty rough if you don't know how to read. Sure not going to be able to fill out anything. You'd eventually have to go over to whoever works at the desk and say, "I can't read it."

The individual's physical ailment becomes the only valid reason for illiterate behavior.

It's sort of a hassle in a hospital. The first time I had to fill out one of them I had my hand busted up, so that helped some. They asked me if I could sign my name and that, and I said, "Well I can hardly sign my name with my right hand." And that was the one that was busted up. So I told them I'll just have to put an X and let them fill it out.

**Driver's Test.** A written driver's examination is primarily an encounter with a text. An orally administered exam, however, is more a social situation. They said they achieved greater success at passing the oral exam because their answers could be recorded by someone else and questions did not have to be read. One man explained how he passed the oral exam in this story:

My sister's oldest boy, he wanted to take his driver's test too. We went from the top cover plumb through that driver's manual. He would read it and then he would ask me and I'd tell him the answers. We kept back and forth that way, but it worked. To come right out and try to do the driver's reading, I can't. That is hard cause I don't know what the meaning is. They could tell that I couldn't read, and then they would help me on it. They would ask me a question and then I'd turn around and answer it correct.

**Other Locations.** Literacy situations were associated with several other locations. Libraries are obvious examples. One person described how he would not "fit in" to a library scene:

People stand out more in different places. Just like if I went into the library or something, and if some
guy went in with one of his friends. Even you could probably recognize which one was in there looking for a book, or which one was just in there sort of glancing at the titles. You'd know, but maybe not. But I know that's what I do. Big deal, go look at a bunch of books.

Another person sees jail as a location of socially situated literacy:

I've always thought, "Jesus Christ, if I ever landed in jail I'd be one screwed monkey, if they didn't have a TV." Because that's all they have is books. And that's all you do is sit around and read. I'd just be one messed up monkey.

Stores are also places where texts are unavoidable. Virtually any purchaseable item has writing on it. One man said he feels conspicuous or vulnerable in stores when he looks at merchandise:

Like in a record store, you usually stand around more and look at stuff. You take a longer look at things, cause you got to look at every item and every word. If you can't read you got to look at the word and really concentrate on what you're looking at. Like the store manager, they see something like that and they figure well maybe that guy's thinking about heisting something. So you just kind of figure out what you want, it takes a little longer to do.

Another situation occurs at the polls while voting. Being unable to read a ballot alters the routine context and can create an embarrassing occasion, as this account illustrates:

I voted a couple of times. But the only reason I voted was, I knew one of the ladies that was working at the registration thing, I went up to her and she knew my mom. She knew that I couldn't read. She filled out the forms and stuff. But what really hurt was my mom had to go in and help me. I couldn't read all the stuff. So, I did that one year, and the next year I didn't vote, I only voted for the president because I remembered his name. I didn't vote for any of the other things because I didn't want my mom to have to help me. It was embarrassing.
Playing games. Cards and other kinds of games played for entertainment can be occasions of situated literacy. The help of others becomes necessary for the individual to participate.

I could pick up on people doing something, I can sit back and watch it. And then I can go in and I can do it. Well it's like sitting down and playing Monopoly. You have to read them little cards, saying go past "Go" or "go to the church," "go to jail." Or you are penalized so much tax. But I'd have to have somebody else. I'd pass on it and I'd say, "well, what's the card say? I don't know. Here, you do it." And I was embarrassed, you know?

Written Jokes. A last social context for illiteracy is the written joke. The illiterates are handed a piece of paper with a joke on it, and they are supposed to read the joke and react accordingly. The inability to respond appropriately and follow the interactional rules creates an ill-defined, uneasy situation:

You might recognize one or two words in there that you might think have some sort of meaning to them. You might mention that word. You might kind of get the drift that it's about a girl or a boy or something. "It's really something about her, isn't it?" And it's really kind of weird to the other person because it isn't quite what they expected. That's not what they get from the other people that can read that joke and can get the full meaning of it. The problem is you don't know whether to laugh or just smile or what. You've got no way of knowing exactly what to do, so you more or less just punt, do a little of both.

PERSONAL FINANCES

Illiterates are marginal members of the economic world, where reading and writing are necessary. They do, however, develop various skillful methods to accomplish their daily financial affairs.
Several informants said they have checking accounts. Writing checks is a major obstacle but can be accomplished with copying, matching, memory, and numerical skills. A typical method is to have a parent or spouse write a list of numbers both numerically and alphabetically, showing the spelling. The individual can then copy that writing onto the check for the appropriate numerical amount. One man described:

When I had a checking account in Polson, my mom wrote, like one dollar, two, three, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, and like that. I never spend hundreds, never have to worry about that. And on the math, I can do pretty good. Mom wrote down the one, two dollars, and put a dollar behind it. Then when I went to the gas station or somewhere... Well I could spell ten and one and two, but you get to twenties and by the thirties I couldn't do it. So I pull out the paper, and find what I was going to write, wrote it down on a check. Wrote it that way.

After using this method for a time the person actually learns or "remembers" how to spell and write the commonly used numbers.

When I write a check I round everything off to the nearest dollar so I'll never be short in the bank. But I always knew, I guess I memorized it. I memorized how to write it out, you know like one, how to spell one and all the numbers, when I started my checking account. I never realized that before. And that's how I got in the habit of writing checks.

Most, however, reported that checking and other bank accounts required a higher level of reading and writing than they could achieve. Their financial affairs are handled on a cash basis:

I just have my checks cashed. I don't like savings accounts. I get in there and fiddle around and probably screw it up. I'm going to try and get one one of these days. It's really hard to have a checking account or savings account cause I can't write out
checks. I could probably figure it out easy enough, I'm not too bad on my numbers. But I just haven't got around to it, or brave enough to get one yet.

Each paycheck is cashed, and all debts and purchases are paid in that manner:

I more or less dealt with cash. If I wanted something, if I didn't have the money, I didn't buy it. I saved my money until I could buy it. My wife, we have a checking account now, but I would just as soon carry cash.

One person described his method of paying bills using money orders. His story of handling finances is:

I've never had a checking account. I'd keep thirty dollars or so out of each paycheck, I always have a little bit of money in my wallet. I just knew how not to blow it all, I manage my money. When I go to the bank to cash my check, I take every bill that I need to pay and I just ask them for a money order. I'd never write a check. Like for rent or electricity, telephone or stuff, all you do is look at the bill. And the bill has the name of the company, the amount and everything on it. So if you can't spell the company's name and the amount, it says right there on the bill. That was easy enough.

Illiteracy is an acute problem in business matters, limiting a person to cash spending and relatively simple transactions. Business texts such as contracts, insurance policies, loans, and investments are approached with caution. Signing one's name without clearly understanding the form is an act in which illiterates feel particularly vulnerable, as these accounts illustrate:

If I went downtown here to buy something on contract, I couldn't make out the words or what he was writing into the contract. Say I borrowed $500. I'd say, "OK, I want to borrow it for a year. Within that year I'll have it paid back." Well he could say fine, and then put down that in six months if not paid back he could re-, you know, take back whatever I'd bought. And if I sign it there's nothing the law can do, because it's
my ignorance that I couldn't read the deal. And you're getting taken for it.

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If you want to add a tape player or some speakers, you want them covered, you tell the insurance agent. They'll say, "We'll send you out a new policy with everything that's on there." They could put on there maybe anything. Then you come up missing a stereo, go back over your policy. Look on the back of the contract, they say, "Well there's nothing on here about a stereo." I say, "Well I specifically told you." And they say, "Well didn't you read it?" "No, I couldn't read." You're not going to tell them that, you're going to say, "Well no, I didn't read it. I just took you at your word."

Historically, illiterates have been victims of many legal and illegal business ventures in which they lose money to other persons. Many respondents reported having experienced situations in which they were "taken" or "ripped-off." They are prone to victimization because they are easily entrapped by contracts they cannot read and, once caught, they have no skills, methods, or knowledge of how to successfully manage the threatening situation. One instance of getting ripped-off is:

Until you get good and job-wise, you get ripped-off all the time. Like when I worked on the railroad, we used to work overtime quite often. I knew about how much I would get on my average check. And if I got a little bit more than average because I worked overtime, I wouldn't know if that's the amount I was supposed to get or not. But I'd have to take it for granted because I couldn't figure it out. I'd talk to some other guys and they told me that that wasn't right, but what was I going to do? You can't even go up and argue with the boss. And what the heck are you going to talk about? "Hey, you ripped me off!" "I ripped you off? How much?" What are you going to tell him?

Another told of using his numerical skills to avoid a similar situation:

I talked to him and this guy in this store, and he
figured, "Well, he don't know how to read, we'll go in and tell them we're working for him and he sent us in to get some stuff." So they went in and done that. I went back over and I get the bill, and I sit down and figured it up. It didn't come out the way it should of, so I went in and told the owner. "By the way," I says, "somebody else is using my account in here." So he says two other guys come in and charged stuff to it. I said they're not supposed to. So I traced it back and found out it was this couple of buddies of mine. So I looked them up and got the money anyhow.

Once the form is signed, the illiterates often do not know how to resolve the situation to their benefit. One person described an incident in which his ex-wife had signed a contract to buy a set of encyclopedias. Only the help of others kept him from paying for the books:

Kurt's girlfriend: This guy said if you don't pay me this right now, you're going to go to jail, you're going to get a lawsuit. And Kurt just totally freaked out. He was laid off so we just went to a lawyer at the legal aid society. We couldn't afford a fancy lawyer. He just said don't pay any attention to it.

Kurt: If it wasn't for her, there's no way that I could have found out where to go to get help. I would have just gave the guy the $400. It wasn't my ignorance that did it, it was my ex-wife's. But I didn't know a thing about the legal aids. And even if I thought about going to a lawyer, if you can't read, how are you going to go and look in the phone book and get help? There's no way. You have to read, because you're always going to run into problems.

In general, illiterates participate in the economy with competency solely at the level of cash. Any higher level involves the ability to read and understand written agreements which the individual may not be able to or desire to fulfill.

ILLITERACY AT WORK

The marginality of illiterates' social participation
extends into occupational situations. Informants reported having held a wide variety of unskilled and semiskilled occupations. Literacy was described as a necessary tool in each job they mentioned. Even operating the simplest machines requires some literacy, as this man said:

To run the machinery you didn't have to know how to read. Just the simple words, "stop, go," "left, right," and I knew how to read them.

Every skill listed previously in this chapter was cleverly utilized for the performance of job tasks. For example, these three accounts describe the use of memory, copying and matching:

I used to sell, I used to give these World Gift parties. I don't know if you ever heard of World Gift, it's all stuff from India, Africa, stuff like that. But I used to, there'd be as high as 75 women at some of those parties. I'd get up there and make speeches in front of them. I had somebody read the book to me, what to say, and then I memorized it. It wasn't that I could read it, I just had it memorized.

★  *  *  *  ★

This girl asked me to take over her place at a doctor's office one day, and I did. But to fill out those papers was something else. Somebody coming in, I always had to ask them how they spelled their name. That was really hard on me. I'd go back over something that she'd written out and how she filled it in, then I could fill it in the same way. I just actually copied what she was filling in. And I worked there two days and the doctor never realized I couldn't read.

★  *  *  *  ★

There is this one kid that I work with at the gas station. He took a check he didn't look at enough. He walked over and stamped it, put his initials on it, stuck it in the till. Wasn't even the lady's check, she just forged it. He didn't pay any attention. A guy gives me a check, I've got to sit there and I got to look at it, see what he's doing. I just match the names, ask the person for a driver's license, look at their signatures. I can guess just looking at the signatures. I can match them up pretty easy.
Three people said they had achieved enough seniority in their jobs that they were "over" other employees. These individuals could relegate work tasks and supervise others. From this position they were able to mandate their own literacy job tasks to lesser, more literate workers. The individual's illiteracy is concealed while other employees competently perform literacy-related duties. Two instances of illiterates in higher status jobs are:

I cooked for four years. They'd tell me to make out a menu or something. I always managed to be a little bit above somebody that could read better than I could, or spell better than I could, which I couldn't. I'd say, "OK, this is the menu today. I want you to write this out and type it up." They'd type it up, then I'd pass it along to the waitresses. Now that was just an easy way around it to me, I couldn't have sat down and done it myself so I was always above somebody that could. And no questions was asked because I was over the, and they had to do it.

I was working in an electronics plant, and they had the blueprints that we had to read. At first I had a hard time but finally I learned how to read those blueprints. I didn't know the meaning of words but I knew how to figure out that blueprint by just looking at the words, but I didn't know what the word was. I was one of the head people in that factory, training everybody else. I'd get them to read the blueprints to me. I'd say, "well read this off to me." Then I'd know how to go about doing it, but I couldn't do it myself.

Another job situation affected by a person's illiteracy occurs in more skilled occupations. As the knowledge and skills required by the job increase in technological complexity, the illiterate becomes increasingly unable to learn the newer techniques and is gradually inept at the performance of his job. This situation was described by an electrician, who said:
I worked for X & X Engineering, in the communications field, sort of an electrician. I think if I would have had a little better education I could have went into more and everything would have been different. But it got to where it was over my head. I couldn't do it. So I had to quit because they were getting more advanced than I was, and I couldn't advance myself because I never could sit down or have anybody that I felt I could tell and they would help my problem. I was as far with the job as I could go, they couldn't put me no place else.

Once a new job is found, the initiation or training period becomes particularly problematic. To avoid being fired, individuals must conceal their illiteracy while quickly discovering the literacy situations and tasks expected of them as well as certain methods and skills to accomplish those tasks.

One man said:

The first day I found out what I needed. There's usually a break-in period where somebody goes around with you. So what I did, I found out what I needed. I wasn't able to write anything down like notes to remind me. And it is really embarrassing, I mean it's a matter of being able to eat or not, if you keep the job or not. So you actually really got to remember, you got to store it up here in your head. I'd take and get an extra piece of paper or something, or one of the forms I was suppose to fill out. Take it home and study it, and then I'd have certain words to write down to fill it out at work.

A useful method or tactic to be developed is the subtle use or manipulation of other persons. The individual may come to depend upon others for help, and dependent relationships may evolve. Jobs in close association with the public are particularly prone to the development of tactics in which the help of others can be enlisted when literacy situations arise; two examples are bartending and calling bingo:

If somebody asks me for a fancy drink, I couldn't fix
it for them. If they knew the book was back behind the bar, then they'd figure out that I couldn't be able to read. So instead of going and looking at that book, I can ask them. I say, "How do you make it, I've never made it?" And they can tell me how to make it. My boss who owns this bar, he told me a long time ago, he says, "Don't know how to make a drink? Ask the person who ordered it, they'll know."

* * * * * *
I call bingo over here on Tuesday nights. I couldn't read anybody's name in the drawings. You know, they write their name on a piece of paper and then you put them in a jar and draw one out. And whoever's name comes out, he gets three bingo cards. I didn't know their names. I mean I couldn't pronounce their names. I'd pass it over to somebody else, I'd have them draw it out for me and say, "Well who's name's on it?" I was depending on somebody else reading it for me, and then I'd announce over the loudspeaker who's name it was.

Illiteracy imposes occupational limitations on individuals. One said that illiterates generally work for other persons or for companies. To be self-employed requires literacy for business situations and bookkeeping:

This business that I have, I started it up and I was doing alright, the physical end of it. But when it comes to make out the books or receipts or anything of that nature, I really fell down there. So this is one of the reasons why I shut it back down. I do jobs for people now and then, for trading or something, but as far as the business end of it, why I can't handle it.

Several said they observed that illiterates suffer slow progress in their jobs and careers. One person said the illiterates tend to hold the same job for many years without seeking advancement or new jobs, goals which would threaten the individual with discovery. With several exceptions, such as those higher status jobs where literacy situations can be controlled, illiteracy
limits persons to marginal occupational roles. Even at unskilled labor, a level of literacy is necessary. The person who cannot reach this level nevertheless tend to manage their work tasks by the artful use of various skills.

**SUMMARY**

The purpose of this chapter has been to identify and describe those everyday situations where illiteracy occurs and the unique skills persons use to practically accomplish these problematic situations and "get through the day." As natural practitioners of society, illiterates were found to use the practical skills of remembering, copying, matching, making notes, pointing, and understanding pictures and numbers. Generally, these skills provide individuals with a heightened awareness of written symbols, their properties, and their social utilization.

Illiteracy is socially situated in daily occasions and events when written language is present as a standard feature. Instances of illiteracy situations were divided for analysis into two aspects, the written text and social context. Initially, in these situations there is an encounter with any form of writing, and various confrontations with such texts as signs, labels, ballots, and phone books were described. Every text is located in a set of social circumstances, including the presence and actions of other people. This social context is marked by the possibility of embarrassment to the individual and by the absence of clearly defined rules and norms. Illiteracy situations in the contexts of restaurants, movies, hos-
pitals, giving directions, filling out forms, and taking a driver's test were discussed.

Illiteracy affects at least two other daily matters, a person's finances and job. Most illiterates expressed an inability to handle checking accounts and wanted to use only cash. They felt vulnerable in any business situation because of the inability to understand contracts and other legal forms. At work, they were able to manage a variety of jobs by the ingenious use of skills and tactics. Their handicap does, however, limit their full occupational participation, especially in advancement.

The last chapter summarizes the findings of this research. It will also offer a general conclusion of how illiteracy affects social participation and a descriptive model of how illiterates view themselves.
CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

You read the paper and get your news and stuff out of it. You more or less fill in the time, reading. I miss stuff like that. Like I am, hard to read, it makes it hard on me. "I don't think I feel in society .... I don't think I fit in, being as that I can't read."

The topic of this study has been the social participation of illiterate persons. My purpose has been to describe how the fact of being without literacy skills influences an individual's accomplishment of belonging to, or being a member of, a group of people. It has been shown that the inability to read affects a person's social involvement by limiting that person to marginal membership in human groups. Gaining, maintaining, and displaying membership is a complex ongoing activity for every person. This study examined the problematic nature of membership as it is specifically related and identifiable through the accounts and experiences of a unique set of individuals, those who cannot read and write.

In our society, intelligence is a necessary qualification of "normal" adult members. Intelligence is significantly displayed by literacy behavior. An illiterate faces the stigma of being unintelligent or "dumb." To avoid this stigma the handicap of not reading is concealed from everyone if at all possible. Concealment is the predominant concern in the social life of an illiterate. Inherent in this desire for concealment is a membership paradox: while wanting to belong and be
accepted by others, the illiterate also feels vulnerable to getting stigmatized and thus avoids active involvement in social relations. By maintaining social distance, the illiterate ensures concealment, isolation, restricted social participation, and marginal membership.

Illiteracy prevents the complete performance of one's roles in relationships. Social expectations of duties and obligations associated with family roles are inadequately fulfilled. The capacity to manage oneself as an independent person is lacking in illiterates, and of necessity they must rely on others in literacy matters. Conflicts arise as these dependent relationships grow and change over time. Friendships and relations in other, more formally organized groups are also characterized by limited participation and involvement.

Another feature of illiteracy causing marginality is the reduced capacity for natural conversation, in which membership is routinely displayed and carried out. Illiterates are unable to converse adequately with others because of their inability to produce and understand literacy talk. Social life and membership is predominantly an oral production, accomplished through talk. It is the verbal world which is especially accommodative to illiterate persons. However, by lacking reading skills and written knowledge, these individuals also are found to lack the oral skills with which membership is displayed. The knowledge of written topics is a significant part of natural conversation. Ordinary topics of conversation
are becoming increasingly technological and sophisticated in our highly literate society, and this fact further reduces the illiterates' ability to show membership in ordinary conversation.

Illiteracy is an individual problem experienced by persons alone. The practical skills illiterates develop are the individuals' adaptations for coping in their social and cultural world. To the extent that literacy affects membership, illiterates are subject to marginality. Other deviant or stigmatized groups have responded to their marginality by "coming out" to society. Illiterates, however, do not join together and develop a membership in their own subcultural group. They perceive their illiteracy as an extremely damaging trait and conceal it from everyone, including fellow illiterates.

In spite of being illiterate, the persons sampled in this study nevertheless are "natural practitioners" of society and, as such, are able to routinely accomplish "getting through the day." They have developed a number of ingenious practical skills, tactics, and strategies to encounter literacy situations and confrontations with the written world. Illiteracy is a socially situated phenomenon, occurring in everyday events where written language is a standard feature. Instances of situated illiteracy involve both a text, something written, and a social context of other people interacting in a specific social setting.

The situated nature of literacy emphasizes its relativity.
Every incident of reading and writing is located in a particular sociocultural context where in one's literacy abilities may or may not conform to those of the group in which the person is participating. Literacy can be a problematic membership practice in more ways than are considered in this investigation, which discussed illiteracy, the case of having no literacy in a literage group. A similar situation is nonliteracy, where the individual is literate but not in the language or speech of the group. Such a situation is common in cross-cultural experiences. Another case, in contrast to illiteracy, is deliteracy. Here, the individual is literate while the social group around him is not literate or is markedly lower in literacy skills. A person in this situation would have to lower or "de-literize" the oral language to better communicate and participate in the group. Finally, the absence of reading skills in both the individual and the group is aliteracy. These four types of situations illustrate how literacy and illiteracy must be differentiated into sociocultural contexts and provide further issues for the sociological study of reading and literacy.

The Disability Model. Chapter One presented three perspectives on illiteracy—historical, deviance, and involvement—which together provide a theoretical framework. The findings of this study suggest an alternative model, which emerged from the talk of illiterate persons themselves. This model is thus derived from the practitioners' way of viewing themselves as members-in-
They see themselves primarily as disabled persons.

The illiterates often compared their handicap to physical disabilities such as the loss of vision or an extremity. Some felt illiteracy to be worse than these other handicaps:

That's worse than having you arms cut off, if you can't read. I mean can you imagine the jobs I can get if I can read right now? I could go to college, and I could be a lawyer or I could be an interior decorator, or I could be a psychologist, or I could be about any goddamn thing I wanted to, if I had the brains to do it, of course. But see, that would open the field up. And I mean you could do all them with one hand, but you can't do none of them without reading. I got two hands and two legs, and I can't do none of them.

Others stated that illiteracy was not as bad:

You just have to learn to cope with it, just like anything else. I feel I'm more fortunate than people that are blind. I'd much rather not know how to read than to have any kind of cancer, or to live in some country and be dying of malnutrition. Or, I would rather not be crippled and ride around in a wheelchair all day. See, so there's a lot of things I feel fortunate in.

They also said that, like other disabled persons, they had developed extra powers or senses to compensate for their handicap:

It's kind of a different type of life, like a person that's blind. Alright, you can't see with your eyes, but you can see with your fingers and your ears, and your nose as well as smell, hear, or feel. When you can't read out of a book, that doesn't mean that you can't read. That don't mean that you're not just as much of a person as anybody else. What it means is that you learn to read and to understand other ways.

However, illiteracy is unlike physical disabilities in several respects. It is not recognized as a legal incapacity:

I got in a wreck and tore up my wrist. Now that prevents me from doing any heavy labor work that I'm used to doing, right. So, see, the law states that this wrist qualifies me for this temporarily disabled program, but otherwise the law states that you have to
be blind. Dyslexia does not fall under it, you know. That means if you have a reading problem, that's tough shit. If you can't read, that's tough shit. They don't consider that a handicap.

Also, it creates a temporal isolation:

See, we can only handle things that are present. Which if you can read, you can handle things from the past and the future. That's what we're missing out, is what's in the past and what's in the future. We're just going on day by day. You can't look forward for something, or go into the past to find out something. The only way we're going to be able to do that is to be able to read.

Generally, illiteracy is more invisible than physical disabilities and easier to conceal. There are no clearly understood social rules and norms to make being illiterate an "acceptable" condition. Being illiterate creates a social incompetency where competency is otherwise expected, as in natural conversations and social relationships. Nor is illiteracy similar to a mental disability; all informants were of "normal" mind and intelligence. Most significantly, illiteracy is a social and cultural disability. It limits social participation and cultural involvement, creating an impaired sense of belonging, an incapacity to pass as a member.

As originally formulated in this research, literacy referred to the skillful ability to meaningfully manipulate symbols for practical reasons. Through the stories it became clear that the definition of literacy should be broadened to include the cultural repertoire acquired through the learning and doing of literate behavior. In a literate society many of
the commonly understood and taken for granted social facts are knowable predominantly through written form. Illiterates are not privileged with this knowledge; they are outsiders to this aspect of their society.

In conclusion, the conceptual clarification presented through this research is an expansion in the idea of membership. The concept of a member as a person participating in a set of socially situated practices and language is refined to include speaking, reading, and writing. Our society is so literate that we take it for granted that people can read "well enough." Illiterates, by actually displaying their incompetencies, show literacy as a membership feature and, specifically, as a membership feature of our society. This feature of literacy is an overlooked part of the essential definition of membership itself. The definition of what constitutes a member must be expanded to take into account both the oral and written dimensions. Linguistic, ethnographic, and other sociological inquiries of membership and membership practices must take into consideration the speaking, reading, and writing features of human groups and their interrelationships.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


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