

# REACTION: THE MYTH AND THE CHALLENGE, A SOCIOLOGICAL RESPONSE

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"Illiteracy" is fast becoming a household term as coverage by the mass media escalates. Television specials, documentaries, docudramas, and even sitcoms have focused on the growing population of Americans who have difficulty decoding the printed symbols and numbers of their native language. Is illiteracy as widespread as has been reported, or is it a product of sensationalism manufactured by the press? The following discussion seeks to provide an answer for this question and others by examining Grider and Kurth's (1986) comprehensive treatment of illiteracy in the contemporary United States.

Kurth suggests that there are many positives to consider when evaluating the magnitude of the problem: 1.) 94% of Americans read the newspaper, 2.) one third of the American population reports reading at least one book every six months, and 3.) *Publisher's Weekly* reports that the book industry was outperforming all other industries in the midst of the 1982 recession. These statistics are encouraging but fail to support underlying issues. For example, how reliable is self-reporting? In studies of language variation, linguists have found that informants tend to respond to surveys in a variety of ways not always truthful or accurate (Labor, 1972; Shuy, 1979; Wald & Shopen, 1983). Self-reporting by individuals or companies is a valid method of data collection, but it must be closely scrutinized and controlled because of the absence of objectivity. On the other hand, 94% readership of newspapers seems unusually high. Other sources (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1982) quote the figure at 55%. Even if the above statistics could stand, such information reflects data elicited from a literate population. Little is revealed about the patterns and practices of illiterate citizens.

The problems of defining terms and identifying appropriate populations of non-readers further complicate illiteracy issues. Grider points out several areas of concern with emphasis on the variation of literacy needs between individuals. In the context of Harmon's (1984) report, Grider suggests that "... many people who would be determined functionally illiterate may have all the skills they need to do activities and solve problems in their daily lives" (Grider & Kurth, 1986, p.2). Yet, we must surely question the quality of life of an individual who cannot read or write as determined by the simplest tests of competency. Homelessness, poverty, incarceration, unemployment, limited physical and social mobility, etc., are all activities and problems that typically characterize the lives of illiterate adults (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Although some of their more chronic problems may be resolved, the general circumstances of a non-reader's life will always be at the mercy of literate authorities and decision makers.

Individual differences is only one of several important components of illiteracy in present day American society. Standards for determining illiteracy have yet to be agreed upon. Grider immediately dismisses the possibility of uniform standards because, in addition to varying individual needs, definitions of the terms "illiterate" and "functionally illiterate" are subject to various interpretations depending on the perspective of individuals or organizations, and definitions of functional literacy are constantly shifting as are the number of people who are counted.

Existing standards are certainly not consistent from program to program and though popular, are often inaccurate and/or misleading. Jones (1981) argues that grade-