

# A CRITICAL LOOK AT ADULT LITERACY IN AMERICA

By John M. Barry

Recently we have witnessed a startling development in the use of survey technology. I will call it *definition research*. Definition research typically involves convening a panel of experts in a given field to draft a *new definition* for a widely understood concept, one which differs significantly from the definition held by most people. A survey then is designed to explore various aspects of the new definition, it's administered, and a report disclosing startling "new" findings is duly released.

We saw this demonstrated a short time ago in a survey on sexual harassment in public schools, sponsored by The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation. Respondents were told that the definition of sexual harassment included "sexual messages and notes" as well as "sexual jokes, gestures and looks." Having set out this framework, the study went on to find that "more than 80% of students in the public schools report that they have been the victims of sexual harassment."

Now, *Adult Literacy in America*, a study recently conducted under the auspices of the US Department of Education, again invokes the definition research strategy. It was heralded by the media as a landmark inquiry into adult literacy. The findings of the \$14 million project were unnerving: nearly 50 percent of adults in the US scored extremely low on a comprehensive test of literacy. *The New York Times*, in a front page story, declared that "half of adults in US can't read or handle arithmetic." The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* gave its story the headline, "The United States of Illiteracy," and *Newsweek's* analysis of the findings concluded, "high schools are awarding degrees to students barely able to read or write."

Advocates for various interest groups, whose proposals for education reform differ dramatically, came together to hail the findings. US Secretary of Education Richard Riley called the study "a wake-up call to the sheer magnitude of illiteracy in this country." William Bennett, secretary of education under President Reagan, was quoted in *Newsweek* to say, "we're dumber than we thought we were."

## A Novel Definition of Literacy

The title of the study is simply *Adult Literacy in America*. It suggests a straight-ahead analysis of literacy in the US. Indeed the press release for the survey, which was prepared by the Department of Education, does not hesitate in announcing the startling nature of the results. The first sentence reads: "Some 90 million adults — about 47% of the US adult population — demonstrate low levels of literacy."

This reported finding seems astounding—until one learns how literacy is defined:

*"Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."*

This definition, of course, differs significantly from what has traditionally been understood as literacy, which Webster's describes as "an ability to read a short simple passage and answer questions about it." Once one understands this dramatic change in definition, it does not seem nearly so surprising that many of us might be described as possessing low levels of literacy. Ironically, the report tells us elsewhere that about 95% of those who tested at the two lowest levels of literacy

claim to read or write well, and that 55% of those in the very lowest level say they read a newspaper at least several times a week.

## Other Problems

Beyond the definition of literacy employed in the study, there are also unresolved questions relating to the survey instrument and its administration.

According to Andrew Kolstad, project monitor of the National Adult Literacy Survey at the National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education, respondents usually needed more than an hour to complete the survey. Kolstad says that initially there was concern among the project directors about attracting a sample of respondents willing to sit still for that amount of time. When a pilot test, which followed traditional procedures for acquiring a random sample of respondents, yielded unacceptable response rates, it was decided that a \$20 incentive would be offered to all respondents. The effect of monetary incentives, in the form of response biasing and so on, continues to be the focus of discussion among scholars and professional survey research practitioners. There remains at least some question about the validity of research in which respondents are paid for their participation.

Secondly, all of the survey items were "open-ended;" each required hand-written responses. Answers were coded by a panel of judges who were provided general parameters for scoring. Nonetheless, one cannot help but wonder about the variability in the test scoring. Consistency in scoring would seem particularly problematic with regard to some of the more sophisticated questions which asked

respondents to comment on things like op-ed pieces from the *New York Times* and to interpret survey data. The report does not state whether inter-rater reliability techniques—which check for consistency in scoring between judges—were administered, and if they were, what the results were.

Finally, there is the fact that the survey instrument is unavailable for examination and analysis. The questionnaire was designed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the organization that administers many nationally standardized tests including the SAT, LSAT, and the GRE. ETS maintains a strict policy of confidentiality and will not release publicly the questionnaire that was used to measure literacy. ETS does not include an example of the survey instrument in its report, and I have been unsuccessful in acquiring a copy of the questionnaire. Everyone who interprets survey findings knows how critical it is to the entire analy-

sis to understand *exactly* what has been asked of respondents. In this instance, the reader is left in the uncomfortable position of accepting, without recourse, the assurance of the study authors that the survey instrument is beyond reproach.

Methodological concerns aside, the principal criticism of this study involves its reliance on a new and unfamiliar set of terms and phrases to define an old and familiar issue. The findings as reported make for good news copy. But such definition research does not contribute to informed discussion of complex and important issues like literacy.

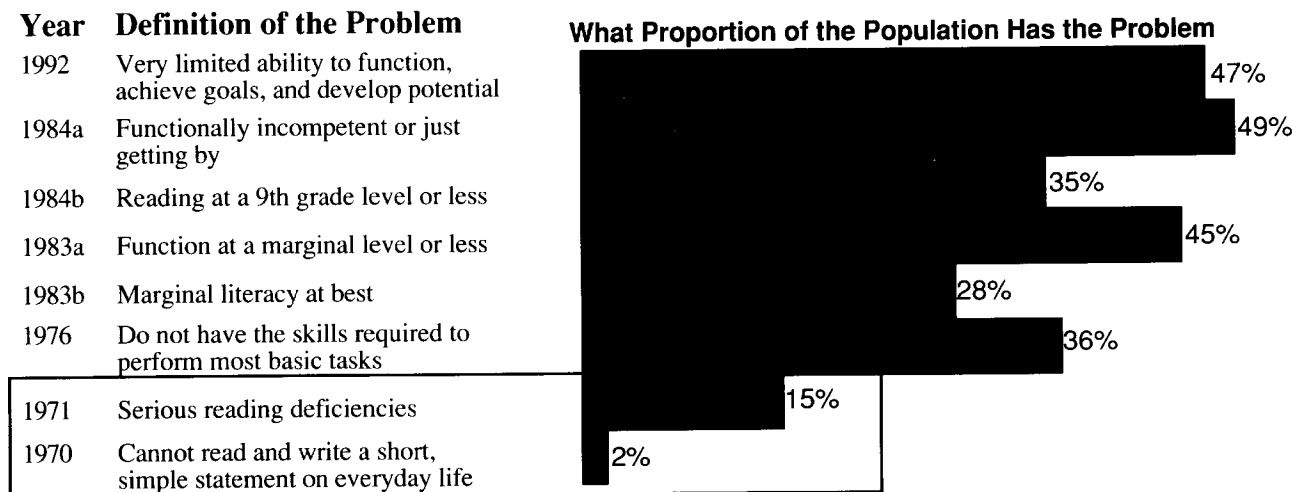
An insightful *Washington Post* editorial, lost to many in a late Saturday edition, commented on the literacy study: "Despite the added emotional punch of the term 'literacy,' which derives mainly from [a] more standard meaning, the kinds of tasks measured in the report might better be described as 'competencies' or

'skills.'...There are millions of people in this country—some undetermined number—who actually cannot read, and they need help. When we want to talk about them, what word is left to use?"

Is illiteracy a problem in the United States? Absolutely. *Adult Literacy in America* is correct in calling our attention to an important problem worthy of increased consideration. But those who are genuinely not able to read and write are not served by research which fails to identify the extent of this problem. After having researched the topic for more than two years (and spent 14 million dollars), the US Department of Education continues to lack the information necessary to institute the programs and policies which will bring about meaningful change for those most in need.

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## THE EVOLUTION OF "DEFINITION RESEARCH" ON ILLITERACY



**Note:** Definition of the problem statements reflect as precisely as possible the descriptions employed in the source documents. Figures for 1970 are for North America which includes the United States, Canada, Bermuda, and Greenland.

**Source:** 1992 data, I.S. Kirsch, A. Jungeblut, L. Jenkins, and A. Kolstad, Educational Testing Service, *Adult Literacy in America* (Washington, DC: US Dept. of Education, 1993); 1984(a) data, Update of the *Final Report of Adult Performance Level Project* (Austin: University of Texas, 1977): cited in J. Kozol, *Illiterate America* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985); 1984(b) data, see Kozol, above; 1983(a) data, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (Washington, DC: US Dept. of Education, 1983): cited in Kozol, above; 1983(b) data, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (San Francisco: US Dept. of Education, 1983): cited in Kozol, above; 1976 data, J. Parker, *Competency-Based Adult Education Profile and Related Resources [Draft]* (Washington, DC: Division of Adult Education, US Office of Education, 1976): cited in C. St. John Hunter and D. Harman, *Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); 1971 data, L. Harris and Associates, *The 1971 National Reading Difficulty Index* (New York, 1971); 1970 data, UNESCO, *Literacy 1969-1971*, (Paris, 1972), p. 22: cited in *A Turning Point for Literacy, Proceedings of the International Symposium for Literacy*, edited by L. Bataille (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1976).