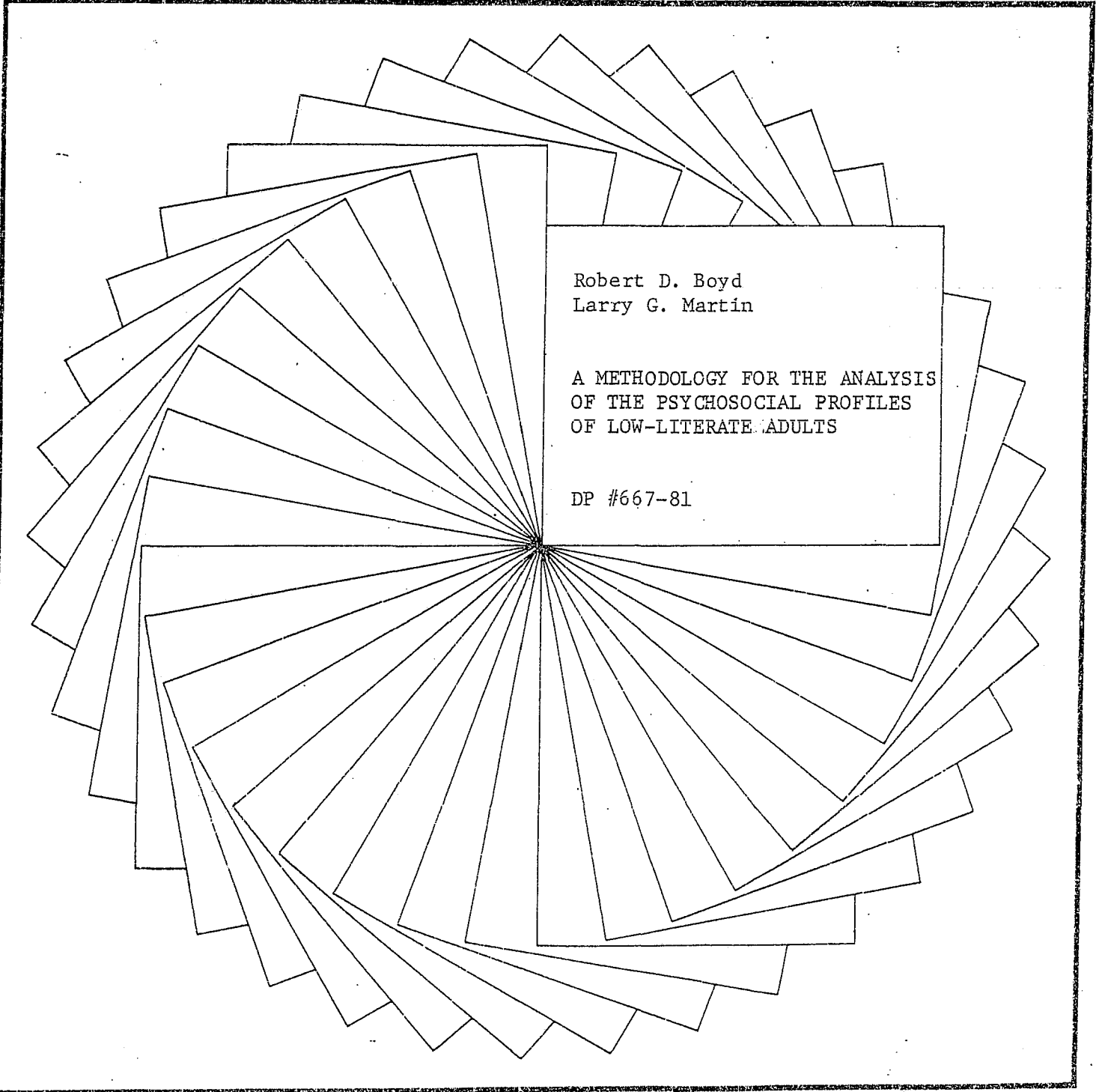




# Institute for Research on Poverty

## Discussion Papers



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A METHODOLOGY FOR THE ANALYSIS  
OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL PROFILES  
OF LOW-LITERATE ADULTS

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A METHODOLOGY FOR THE ANALYSIS OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL PROFILES  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and testing of a practical instrument, the Self-Description Questionnaire (ABE/ASE form), which can readily be used by teachers to identify the psychosocial factors that may be major contributors to the learning problems experienced by low-literate adults. The instrument, developed from a methodology based on the epigenetic theory of Erik Erikson, gives psychosocial profiles of individuals. The paper reports the reliability and validity of the instrument, and provides concrete examples to demonstrate how teachers can make use of the framework and data obtained.

## A Methodology for the Analysis of the Psychosocial Profiles of Low-Literate Adults

### PROBLEM

Significant progress has been made in providing practical aids in instruction for teachers of adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) programs. These aids include instructional materials, teaching manuals, and guides to methods, based on experience, which have proven successful. Such aids have given more structure and coherence to instruction, and improvement in the students' learning has been reported as a result of their use. But as teachers have become more skilled in their use of various methods, they have become increasingly aware of learning barriers that their students are experiencing. Having found solutions to the large problems of finding appropriate materials and of discovering successful methods and techniques of facilitating learning for low-literate adults, teachers are now facing more subtle but equally important problems. There are numbers of adults who do not respond, who do not appear to be able to learn or even to cope with the learning situation, and whose lack of response has not been overcome through the combinations of methods and techniques that have been shown to be successful in other settings and with other adults. These failures to cope and to learn have been traced generally to the psychosocial problems the adult is encountering. Experienced teachers have long been aware of this relationship, and although awareness is a first step

toward resolving the psychosocial problems that create barriers to learning, what is needed is a working knowledge of a comprehensive psychosocial framework that will enable the teacher to identify the psychosocial factors that are key contributors to the problem.

Recent research in instrument development has advanced Erik Erikson's (7,8) epigenetic ego-stage theory as a comprehensive framework to develop the psychosocial profiles of individuals (3,4,5). Practical application of this framework to the learning situation has facilitated the development of a special instrument (19,20) which can readily be used by teachers to identify the psychosocial factors which may be major contributors to the learning problems experienced by low-literate adults. Testing and application of this instrument are reported in this paper.

#### THE PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

The psychosocial problems experienced by low-literate adults affect their behavior patterns in classroom, social, and work environments and contribute substantially to their remaining in the lowest social stratum in the United States (14,20). The existence and mitigating effects of these problems have been documented and discussed by authors who identify low-literates as being unable to function in a complex technological society and subdued by self-perpetuating negative self-concepts which prohibit their active participation in academic settings (1,13,15,19,21). When the low-literates, as adults, reenter education, they often discover that the academic environment is inadequately prepared to either understand

their psychosocial problems or to help them cope with these problems (12,16,17,18,21). It becomes evident to any careful observer that the low-literates, in an academic milieu, are trapped in a hopeless, recurring chain of events that locks them into self-defeating views of themselves and obstructs their motivation to achieve through education a standard of living commensurate with their levels of ability (9,10).

Extensive documentation has been provided by the literature on the scope and significance of the psychosocial problems experienced by low-literate adults--for an in-depth analysis of the literature, see Martin (20)--but the literature offers few concrete suggestions concerning ways of helping these adults to restructure their problems in a more positive manner. Without concrete proposals, teachers are left only with a better understanding of the psychosocial problems which are a fundamental part of the educational problem. Teachers need three kinds of professional help. They need (1) to be helped to conceptualize the psychosocial problems; (2) the means to identify the individual learner's unique problems; and (3) suggestions to start them in translating this knowledge into appropriate and constructive instruction.

This study focuses on the second of these three forms of help. That is not to say the other two have been ignored, for in very concrete terms we have proposed that Erikson's epigenetic theory be used as the conceptual framework by which to understand psychosocial development. We end the paper with some concrete examples to demonstrate how teachers can make use of the framework and the data from the instrument which is discussed below.

## PSYCHOSOCIAL FRAMEWORK

In 1950 Erikson presented an epigenetic theory of human development titled "The Eight Stages of Man." In this writing he extended Freud's (11) theory of psychosexual development of the libido into the sphere of ego processes. The ego is seen as a developing part of personality in its own right, and is assumed to develop systematically in conjunction with general maturation. Erikson conceptualized ego development as occurring in eight sequential stages, each successive stage enabling the individual to engage in more complex activities and interpersonal relationships than in the preceding stages. He postulated that each stage is focal to a certain chronological period of life (Table 1), and that at each of these periods the ego faces a psychosocial crisis which is resolved either more positively or more negatively, and which in turn influences subsequent ego development. Erikson believed that at a certain point in time an individual is propelled from his present stage into the next developmental stage regardless of his resolution of his present stage crisis. Unsuccessful resolution of the crisis generally prevents positive resolution of succeeding stages.

In the normal, healthy development of the ego there is not a sharp polarity to the resolution of a crisis. Erikson has emphasized that the positive resolution of a crisis, for example, "Trust" as opposed to "Mistrust," also contains a certain residue of the negative. Finally, each crisis exists in some form before it becomes "phase-specific," and the resolution of each crisis exists as an active dimension of the ego as new crises are met.

Table 1

## Freud's Psychosexual Ages and Erikson's Ego Stages

| Psychosexual Ages                  | Ego Stages                               |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Oral-Sensory (infancy)             | Trust vs. Mistrust                       |
| Muscular-Anal (early childhood)    | Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt             |
| Locomotor-Genital (late childhood) | Initiative vs. Guilt                     |
| Latency (transition to youth)      | Industry vs. Inferiority                 |
| Puberty and Adolescence (youth)    | Ego Identity vs. Role Diffusion          |
| Young Adulthood                    | Intimacy vs. Isolation                   |
| Adulthood                          | Generativity vs. Stagnation              |
| Maturity                           | Ego Integrity vs. Despair and<br>Disgust |



## METHODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT

Although it has been some thirty years since Erikson's epigenetic theory was set out in his book Childhood and Society, it has received only limited acceptance, and has only recently been adopted as a conceptual framework for research. Among the first researchers to do so was Boyd (3), who developed a methodology by which interview data could be coded, on the basis of its psychosocial content, into a given ego stage. In a later study (4), he developed a projective technique, using pictures, to obtain psychosocial data on children and youth. In subsequent research Boyd developed a Q sort (a method for identifying a person's self-perception), which was employed by Colley (6) as a test of its applicability in research. These three methodologies were very time-consuming and expensive to administer and to analyze. As an alternative, Boyd developed the Self-Description Questionnaire (5) which employed psychosocial statements that were responded to through two six-point scales: the Like-Unlike Scale and the Pertinency Scale. Other methodologies have been developed since then, but it was the Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ) that was the generational link to the instrument reported on in this study.

### The Self-Description Questionnaire, ABE/ASE Form

The literature on low-literate adults provides data on their general psychosocial characteristics, but those data cannot be directly associated to actual individuals. For example, the literature states that low-literate adults, as a group, have problems in trusting, but that does

not mean that Mrs. Smith who is sitting before the teacher has problems in trusting. The teacher needs to get to know Mrs. Smith as soon as possible, not only to know the learning help she needs but also to identify the psychosocial problem(s) that may act as a barrier to her learning. Acquiring such knowledge would ordinarily take hours of personal interactions. If such knowledge were available at the very outset of their interactions, it is possible that help could be given immediately. A method that could provide such data would be of great assistance. Martin (19) proposed the development of a self-description instrument, similar to that developed by Boyd (5), which would yield data on the psychosocial profiles of particular low-literate adults.

The Self-Description Questionnaire (ABE/ASE form) was developed by Martin (19) as a revised form of the SDQ (5) to identify and describe the psychosocial characteristics of ABE/ASE students. The short, 64-item form was subsequently revised to improve its applicability. Where possible, item statements were shortened; and multisyllabic words and esoteric terms were replaced by monosyllabic words and terms familiar to low-literates. After being reviewed by several ABE/ASE teachers, the revised statements were reviewed by a panel of three judges who were familiar with Erikson's model and its focus in the SDQ. The final instrument consisted only of those statements approved by all three judges.

The clarity, reliability, and applicability of the instrument to a population of ABE/ASE students were tested with a group of 30 students.

in southern Wisconsin. To avoid the reading problems of illiterate students in the sample, the instrument was administered by taped recording. The low-literate adults in the pilot study raised questions about a small number of test items; their questions sought clarification in connection with how the statements related to their personal lives and did not appear to reflect problems of understanding. It was reasonable to conclude from these experiences in administering the instrument that the items were understandable and pertinent to adult low-literates. Martin, using the Reciprocal Averages Program (RAVE)--developed by Frank Baker (2)--to test the instrument's reliability, found a high correlation of coefficients for both scales: .93 for the Like-Unlike Scale and .97 for the Pertinency Scale. He concluded that the instrument provided adequately consistent measures to proceed with his study.

Although the reliability levels reported were exceptionally high, Martin was concerned about the questions of clarity students raised about several items and the length of time it took to administer the instrument in groups--approximately one hour. For these reasons, he suggested revisions which were reviewed by Robert Boyd, who also suggested ways of clarifying its administration. So that it could be conveniently administered on different occasions, the new form was divided into two parts, each with 32 items. Part one consisted of statements relating to the first four stages of Erikson's model; part two contained statements concerning the last four stages. This form was pilot-tested with a group of 68 ABE/ASE students in northern Alabama. The students completed both parts of the instrument in less time than it took to complete the

single form, and asked fewer clarifying questions, of which none referred consistently to the same items. Subsequent discussions with the students revealed that they did indeed understand the focus of the statements and considered their participation in the exercise a learning experience. Reliability coefficients of correlations were computed by the RAVE item analysis technique. They were found to be .91 and .93 for parts one and two of the Like-Unlike Scale and .96 for both parts of the Pertinency Scale. The instrument was therefore judged highly consistent and clearly applicable in identifying the psychosocial characteristics of ABE/ASE students.

#### APPLICATION OF THE INSTRUMENT

The Self-Description Questionnaire (ABE/ASE Form) can be used in two broad areas of literacy education: the first is at the recruitment and entry level, the other at the instructional level. One of the severe obstacles to literacy education is getting adults involved in the program. Overcoming fears and resistance can be a major problem. Therefore, problems associated with building trusting relationships with students are often the first major psychosocial difficulties faced by teachers. The data obtained from the two scales of the instrument can help the teacher to identify the levels of trust and mistrust students have in themselves and in others, and their willingness to change these self-perceptions when they address such statements as "I am cautious with trusting a stranger in a new situation until I know a good deal about him"; "I am usually

patient when solving puzzling problems for I know an answer will develop in time"; "I usually feel pretty sure when I lose something valuable for I believe I will get it back"; and others. Similarly, the psychosocial problems such as those associated with autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, etc., are equally addressed by the instrument. We do not propose that the instrument be forced on these adults, for not only would there be a strong likelihood of resistance, but such a procedure may drive the adult away forever. A sensitive counseling program should make it possible to introduce and employ the instrument. The data used as a mutual exploration between the school official and the adult may lay the groundwork for a constructive, individually oriented educational program for the adult.

For teachers, the instrument provides a means to identify students who have negative ego-threatening psychosocial characteristics before the classroom environment itself becomes an ominous antagonist. Some of the consciously practiced techniques available to teachers who have been successful in identifying such students are (1) spending more time learning to know the student as a person, and being consistent in behaviors and attitudes, to foster trust; (2) maintaining patience in helping students to identify the choices available in problem situations, for instance, to make their own decisions from the available choices about learning goals, to develop autonomy; and (3) encouraging students to start their own projects, to be aggressive, and to pursue activities that most interest them, in order to build initiative.

Analysis of the data from the questionnaire serves as the raw material from which a creative and sensitive teacher structures a

supportive and challenging learning environment for each student. The questionnaire's advantage is that teachers can move immediately to promote and establish those relationships that serve as the basis upon which learning can advance.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Workshops, seminars, and teacher-training sessions should be widely instituted to prepare teachers constructively and systematically to help students cope with their negative, self-perpetuating psychosocial characteristics. The goals would include (1) helping teachers understand the epigenetic theory as a working framework through which to explain human development and behavior; (2) providing teachers with practical experience in administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of the instrument; and (3) providing exercises in designing strategies to help students cope with the problems identified.

The adoption of this kind of program for teacher in-service education will result in a number of benefits. First, programs will retain more students because the improved communication between the school personnel and the adult students will result in fewer students dropping out. Second, the students will work on improving their self-images, and a strong and positive self-image enables a student to face the challenges of learning with greater psychic resources. Third, the teacher who is part of a successful learning enterprise will have greater enthusiasm and higher morale which should help to reduce the occurrence of "burn-out" among teachers and to increase their capacity to help students surmount difficult

learning problems. Finally, communities profit from successful education: an adult who feels good about him or herself and has the competencies and skills to be productive adds not only to his or her own sense of worth but also to the welfare of the community.

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