

## **Chapter Four**

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Illiteracy Experienced as a Stigma**

Previous research (Adkins and Ozanne 1997, 1998; Beder 1991; Eberle and Robinson 1980) supports the notion that low literate people are stigmatized. Goffman (1963) conceptualizes a stigma as the possession of a characteristic that is socially discrediting and sets the stigmatized individual apart from “normal” others. Our society values educational attainment and passes negative judgment on those low literate individuals who fail to attain basic skills in communication. Society’s reactions to those with limited literacy skills provide an illustration of the institutionalization of the low literacy stigma (Becker and Arnold 1986). As one informant in the NIFL pre-study explained when s/he was trying to renew a driver’s license after the State began requiring drivers to pass a written test for renewal:

I went in and was told to fill out the paper. I said, “I can’t.” He wouldn’t listen. He said, “Of course you can. Go over to that table, read it, and fill it out.” Felt as if every eye in the room was on me. I looked at it and froze. I could read name, address, and phone, but I was so nervous and embarrassed, I couldn’t even do that. Left and never went back.

Additionally, the data in this study support that low literate individuals are indeed stigmatized. All the informants suggested that their failure to gain adequate literacy skills socially discredited them, which was experienced as shame.

Sometimes I get ashamed.... I say “Go down one aisle and if you can’t find what you are looking for go to the next.” I just say, “Don’t ask (for help)” (Eric)

Well, I’ve always been embarrassed because I couldn’t read very well. And, you go out and try to read road signs if you are traveling or something, and you can’t read that well. I’ve always wanted to read. I mean, I’ve got books. All kinds of books at the house. But I couldn’t read all that well. And I was just wanted to read them. (Olive)

Yeah. And, I’ve seen people have the clerks make out their checks because they couldn’t write the check out. They didn’t know how to spell. I had trouble remembering how to spell twelve. And when I run up against that, I always looked and made my checks out. Because I feel bad that I didn’t know how to spell it. (Sarah)

This shame ranged in intensity from a pain that “I just snub off (George)” to episodes of visceral panic and even “breaking out in tears every time I told someone (Rebecca).” Similarly, in the modified thematic apperception portion of the interviews, informants often made attributions of shame and embarrassment to the person depicted in the drawings or towards other people who have limited literacy skills. While all three pictures portrayed marketplace situations, the first drawing shown to the informants illustrated a lone consumer examining a box of cereal in the grocery aisle (see Figure 1). This particular drawing generated several attributions of embarrassment and, at times, the informants seemed to relate personally to the imaginary person depicted in the picture.

Maybe embarrassment. It embarrasses me. I wouldn't tell anybody about it. (Bill)

He's feeling not really good. You know, if he's just like looking at it and thinking, “Well, I don't know what it says. I can't make out the words.” He's probably feeling really bad....You know. (Tina)

He's feeling bad. ...He can't read nothing. (Jack) [Note: this informant is a non-reader]

In addition to the experience of shame, the informants felt socially marginalized. Informants often relayed personal experiences where they were called such names as “stupid,” “ignorant,” “retarded,” “dumb,” “slow,” and “dough-dough head.” Moreover, when their illiteracy was discovered, they were socially ostracized.

You have to be. I mean, when your friends make fun of you and call you retarded, and you can't do it... you know.... If you start dating and they know you're dating and they meet the girl and say, you know, and they'll say stuff like, “You know he can't read.”...(Jeff)

I know once at the Post Office. I went to the Post Office. So I went and asked for some help with something. And I know it was me he was talking about. I wasn't sure of really what I heard all of it, but I know they was saying something about I couldn't read very well.... (Olive)

Yeah. You know a lot of people on the other side. When you are in a group and you're talking, you know, they'll look at you and think “What do you know?” Especially these people with an education, some of them. They think they know it all. And they really make you feel beneath them. (Sarah)

Given the name-calling and social discrediting, many of these low literate adults regularly lived in fear of these negative social evaluations. Many informants talked about their fear of making a mistake or “messing up,” which is consistent with social stigma theory.

The stigma of low literacy impacted the informants’ self-esteem. In this extended quote, Tina relates the crushing loss of her driver’s license that she had earned through hard work and in which she took pride. Tina needed to reveal her reading problems – a very uncomfortable situation for this self-described “faker.”

It was awful. It was awful. I mean... I was like sweating profusely. I was nervous. And, I couldn’t read none of the words. And, see, they wouldn’t give it me orally. Because, the first time they won’t give it to you orally over here in (State). You’ve got to do the reading. I failed it. And I felt so bad. I felt so low. It’s like, I had my license. And, you know, I kept praying. I prayed a lot. I said, “God, please don’t let me lose my license. I worked so hard in high school to get my license. I don’t want to lose it now.” So, I called them up over there... I took the test and I failed it and I felt really bad and really low. My self-esteem that day was real low. It was like it bit the dust, man. It was like, this is it. But, then I thought, I’m gonna call them and see if I can take it orally. I thought, if somebody could read it to me, I’ll know the answers. It was so... you know, it was so devastating. Because it was like I knew it in high school. (Tina)

Similarly, Nancy’s visit to the optometrist illustrates her shame of illiteracy, the social marginalization when it is discovered, and the accompanying assault on her self esteem.

...and they sent me to Dr. Gillespie. He stood back on that old chart. And he put it in front of me and he wanted me to read it. I couldn’t read it. Man, he just yelled. He said, “Well, I’m telling you to read that.”... He embarrassed me. And there were people out in the waiting room and he’s saying that so loud... Very low. I mean, everybody in there is probably thinking I’m dumb as hell. You know, because I can’t read and write very well... And he pulled it away from me and said, “Can you see anything on there?” And I said, “I couldn’t.” He said, “Well, you are going to have to read this to me or you can’t get your glasses.” (Nancy)

For other informants, the magnitude of the stigma’s impact on their feelings of self-worth was perhaps most apparent as they related their experiences with the adult literacy help programs. All informants expressed gratefulness to the literacy volunteers who serve as tutors. The process of seeking literacy assistance, while at times a very scary venture, provided huge rewards for the informants. Consistent with earlier research (Adkins and Ozanne 1998), Frank

described the experience as having a “door open up” for him. Another informant reported a transformation to feeling “like a human being,” and Michael voiced a regret that he waited so long to seek assistance saying that if he had done it earlier, he would have had “a better look out on several things.” Several informants expressed increased confidence and overall self-worth.

When... lots of time you go to Church and each one of them read. And, some of them, I wouldn't know the words. And, I just felt like I was maybe stupid. But I knew I wasn't. I just didn't know ... I just refused sometimes to read, because of that. But I wouldn't now. I'll take a chance, even if I didn't know it. [laughing] That's what they've done for me. They made me confident in myself. (Sarah)

It's been amazing. It made me feel good. You got more dignity. Is that the right word to use? Dignity? [Interviewer: Dignity.] ...And you got more pride in yourself. You dress better. You shave more. One time, if I didn't shave in a week, it didn't matter. If I didn't comb my hair in a week, it didn't matter. Now, it matters to me.... Oh, yes.... With LVA, I am. That's the greatest thing that ever happened. Thank you very much. (William)

I love it, and I feel good about being able to teach my kids. And, I feel good about when they bring the papers home and be able to understand what I am seeing and read and write. (Ginger)

This general self-confidence was specifically manifest in the marketplace when George talked about how his improved literacy skills allowed him to get an Ames discount card of which he was particularly proud. Similarly, more than one informant spoke with pride about “not being afraid” to go grocery shopping, and another person attributed his improved literacy skills to helping him buy a home. Ginger gushed with pride as she relayed her feelings on her purchase of a vacuum cleaner soon after she was able to “read directions,”

...I bought me a sweeper. And, I put it together. I read the directions. Followed step by step. I felt so proud that I put the sweeper together. ...I did it! I did it! No help. That's a good feeling. (Ginger)

### **Factors that Increase the Use of Coping Strategies**

As discussed in Chapter Two, Review of Relevant Literature, stigmas may profoundly impact the stigmatized individual's self-esteem and self-concept as a result of the negative social evaluations made by the “non-stigmatized.” Research (cf. Crocker and Major 1989; Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Goffman 1963; Jones et al. 1984) supports when repeated assaults on

ones' self-esteem are experienced, then the stigmatized individual may engage in self-protective strategies to lessen the impact of the assault on his/her feelings of self-worth.

Social psychology researchers (Crocker and Major 1989; Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Goffman 1963; Jones et al. 1984) previously identified general characteristics of various stigmas, which impact the degree to which a stigmatized individual attempts to engage specific self-protective mechanisms. For the stigma of low literacy, three characteristics were postulated to be of particular relevance: time since acquisition, responsibility, and visibility. Conceptually these three categories appear reasonable with previous anecdotal support of their existence and role within the stigma of illiteracy reported. The data at hand, however, provides some empirical support for the premise of these characteristics impacting the likelihood that people with limited literacy abilities will engage in self-protective measures within the marketplace.

#### Time Since Acquisition

The shorter the time period one possesses a stigma, the less probable an individual is to draw upon strategies to protect themselves from the bombardment of assaults on their self-esteem (Jones et al. 1984; Crocker and Major 1989). Literacy skills develop from an early age. As children enter the first and second grades (approximately aged six to seven years old), learning to read is a primary activity in their educational and social development. Thus, from a very early age, children learn that society places value on the acquisition of literacy skills. For those adults with lower literacy levels, they have grown up without these valuable literacy skills knowing that society looks disapprovingly on their limited abilities. All of the informants in this study have had at least ten years to refine the stratagems that allow them to experience life in a literate world.

A second proposed relevant characteristic of the low literacy stigma for adults takes into account the responsibility for the individuals reading problems. Limited support found for this characteristic is discussed in the following subsection.

#### Perceived Control or Responsibility for the Stigma

Eberle and Robinson (1980) note that unlike physical handicaps, which are generally believed to exist beyond the control of the affected individual, low literacy is believed to be the

responsibility of the individual, i.e., within his or her control. If only the individual tried harder in school or paid more attention, then the skill deficits would not exist. Limited direct support for this dimension emerged in the interviews with the 22 informants. In nearly all cases, the perception that others believed they were at least partially responsible for not being more literate was embedded within the informants' accounts of feeling embarrassed and ashamed. This finding is consistent with the stigmatization process. That is, stigmatization occurs when society, in general, passes negative evaluation towards an individual possessing specific characteristics. The informants perceive this negative evaluation to occur as a result of some personal shortcoming.

While informants acknowledge being negatively evaluated, they tried to distance themselves from assuming responsibility for their limited literacy skills, instead attributing the negative evaluations to society's "misunderstanding" of the problem. For example, Ginger challenges the opinion that she could read better if she was not so lazy,

... Yeah. Thinking I'm lazy. I don't want to. I'll tell you, if I could do it, I'd give a million dollars. I am so independent. I'm not lazy. Something like that, I would love to scribble and write and spell. You know what I mean? But, those people cannot (understand), and I learned not to take it so hard. (Ginger)

Bill recounted his childhood memories of being put into classrooms with the "D and F students" where teachers "wouldn't help" or "didn't have time" for them (Field Notes, 3/13/00). Other informants speculated the root of their literacy difficulties to be related previously undiagnosed dyslexia.

The third characteristic, of the low literacy stigma, relevant to the utilization of coping strategies, addresses the visibility or ability to conceal the stigma from others. This proposed relationship found support in the data as well.

### Potential of Concealing the Stigma

Relatively speaking, it is difficult to assess an individual's literacy skill level by merely looking at someone; however, functional interactions may illuminate the illiteracy stigma quickly (Gardner 1991). Goffman (1963) classifies stigmas where the attribute can be hidden as

discreditable, meaning avoidance of the negative evaluations occurs as long as the characteristic remains undisclosed.

As reported previously, informants spoke of feeling embarrassed and ashamed of their low literacy skill levels. They also spoke directly about wanting to keep their literacy problems concealed from others, especially those whom they did not know. The ability to conceal reading problems in the marketplace is demonstrated by Tina's handling of money. By only using dollar bills when others are around, Tina is able to keep her limited literacy and numeracy skills concealed.

I do, when people's not looking. Like the pop machine. I just, you know, I'm thinking well, if I hit the button and it's not the right amount of money, I just pour more money in it, because there's nobody really standing around watching. But, when I go into a restaurant or if I go into a clothing store, or a grocery store, I never use change. (Tina)

The ability to keep their low literacy levels concealed can serve as a deterrent to seeking literacy help. Additionally, if low literate consumers can easily conceal their skill deficiencies they may not consciously recognize an impact of low literacy skills on their daily interactions. The low literates' abilities to conceal their literacy problems through the use of various coping strategies contributes to the lack of perceived need for literacy assistance as reported by Beder (1991). Although the data support the notion of low literacy experienced as a stigma, the precise impact of the stigma on the low literate informants' feelings of self-worth could not be quantified through this research. Additionally, many of the coping strategies identified in the data do not work directly at protecting the informants' self-esteem. Therefore, in Chapter 5 stigma theory will be revisited to expand the discussion and conceptualization of low literate consumers' marketplace behaviors.

Next, the range of domains impacted by literacy is briefly discussed. Finally, the coping strategies that low literate consumers use in the marketplace are explored in depth. While many of these coping strategies may be used across all of the following life domains, this research focused on the adaptation struggles that were specific to the marketplace.

## Low Literacy Impacts Multiple Life Domains

Jennings and Purves (1991) describe literacy as a pervasive force in an individual's life. In this study, the impact of low literacy also had a profound impact on the lives of the informants. Simply put, adults with limited literacy and numeracy skills experience negative consequences across multiple life domains.

Statistics suggest that low literate adults possess lower lifetime income potential than those with higher literacy skills (Kirsch, Jungeblut, and Campbell 1992). Repeatedly, informants expressed a desire to improve their literacy in order to improve their employment situation. In several situations, the possibility of securing employment served as a motivating factor for continued efforts to improve their literacy skills. While discussing long-term goals, Bill confided his desire to return to teaching small engine repair at a local vocational school. He was forced to leave a job he truly enjoyed since his second-grade reading level prevented him from obtaining a high school general equivalency diploma. Similarly, Michael details how his reading problems prevented him from accepting a well-paying job with a utility company.

Other informants note the obstacle of even being able to complete a job application without assistance. Chris underscores the link between literacy skills and “good jobs” when he advises others with reading problems to seek tutoring. Tammy acknowledges this connection when she recounts why she is trying to raise her reading level from a sixth-grade level even though she would prefer to “stay home,”

...but my mom don't want me to. She always stayed home all her life, and my mother broke down and cried. She don't want me to end up like that.

Not only do limited literacy skills hinder individuals from obtaining “good” jobs, they also complicate the tasks need to maintain a household. Tasks, ranging from reading the terms of their mortgage to writing checks for the household bills, cause difficulty for low literate adults.

Low literacy skills profoundly influence the informants' ability to be good parents and role models. Jeff, Ginger, Heather, Tammy, Olive, Nancy, Rebecca, Michelle, Paul, and Michael all grapple the impact of their low literacy skills on their children. Simple tasks, such as

writing an “excuse” for a child’s absence from school or reviewing and helping with homework are daunting.

When low literate adults enter the marketplace as consumers, literacy skill levels do not miraculously improve. Everyday shopping tasks generate *potential* difficulties. Sometimes the problems result from an inability to find and understand pricing; at other times, the stumbling block may come when writing a check to pay for items. All informants relay instances where in a marketplace environment improved literacy skills could remove, or at the very least diminish, barriers they face.

Due to the marketing focus of this research, in the following sections I will discuss the coping strategies as they manifest within the marketplace environment. In the interpretation chapter, how these various strategies fit with past conceptual research is discussed.

## **Memorization**

The data reveal a frequently employed strategy: the memorization of textual, visual, and spatial cues to get needs met within the marketplace. Low literate consumers routinely rely on their memories in order to negotiate the complex world in which they live. While an average literate person might write down directions or use maps, low literate people commit travel routes to memory. In one discussion with Frank, he explained where he lives by telling me how to get to his house by carefully describing the various landmarks along the way (Field Notes, March 20, 2000). Both Nancy and Bill tell of memorizing colors in order to function in their workplace. Bill reveals how he memorized the color codes for each of the motorcycle brands he repaired and eventually he did not have to depend on the colors because he knew which part went to which bike. In addition to using memorization skills in their work and daily lives, all informants recounted instances where they relied heavily on their memorization skills across various marketplace contexts.

Informants discussed memorizing the layouts of retail outlets where they frequently shop in order to find items on subsequent trips. While Chris’ shopping trips are limited, he knows not only where the electronics department is, but also the general organization within that department from store to store. Other informants implicitly report their dependence on pictures

used on store signage, especially sale signs, to aid in shopping. Ginger explains one benefit she receives by memorizing store layouts,

...I learn as I'm doing it. Okay, this is what for next time I go. Okay, this is where I can find it... I usually go to the same store because it's a lot easier. I know where is what, and what to find and where is what I need. So that saves me time.

Memorizing the retail environment increases shopping efficiency by saving time. As Tina states: "Once I got the store pegged out, I know where everything's at." Yet this need to memorize the retail layout constrains the informants' shopping choices to those stores with which they are familiar.

This memorization strategy also helps low literate consumers select products. By memorizing product brand names, logos, package designs, and colors, consumers reduce the amount of time spent examining alternatives and increase their ability to obtain their preferred products. Like most consumers, this strategy allows low literate consumers, like Alan, to "grab and buy." However, low literates differ in their extensive use and dependence on these strategies. Chris speaks of knowing which cereal to purchase because he "rememorizes" the picture on the box. Similarly, Tammy looks for the little rabbit on the cans of infant formula (Enfamil brand). Some informants take product labels to the store as a form of external memory in order to "match them up" and buy the item they desire.

A few informants suggest visuals serve as heuristics to indicate product quality. As Paul explains, "...if it looks good on the box, it's got to be good. That's what a lot of people does." In addition to pictures serving as external memory cues and heuristics, low literate consumers pay attention to the colors as a means of product differentiation. This aspect is highlighted in Heather's account of helping an aunt who has even greater literacy challenges, than she has:

And, I noticed a couple times she'd go and she'd pick up the bottle and she'd look at it, like, you know, trying to figure out which is which. And, she handed me the bottles and she says, "Heather, which one is which?" I says, "Well, the Aleve is in the short top with the blue label on it." I says, "you take two of them, it's supposed to last for 12 hours."

Television commercials play an important role in determining what the low literate consumer memorizes for future shopping trips. Low literate consumers use commercials to

memorize brands ranging from over-the-counter pain relievers to fast food offerings. One informant even credits memorizing commercials with teaching her how to shop.

...So I can look at the name brand of Tylenol because, I've learned name brands by watching commercials. And they are real good. So, I was talking to someone who was talking about logos. And that's how I learned how to do some of my shopping, through logos. Tylenol, Bufferin, aspirin, and stuff like that. I can go to the store and I can find that.  
(Rebecca)

Television ads increase brand awareness of national brands, which many of the consumers bought. But given their constrained resources, informants also bought store brands. As described above, Rebecca looks for brands she has seen in television commercials yet she often buys "off-brand" items in order to save money.

Another informant, Eric, lives on a fixed income and routinely speaks of being mindful of the price of items. By using the visual information displayed on the product packaging, Eric compares the brand name cereal "Co-Co Wheats" with a similar product sold under another brand name at a lower price and opts for the cheaper item.

For all consumers, memorizing retail layout and brand cues makes shopping easier. But unlike the literate consumer, low literate consumers used their memorization ability to make shopping a safe and comfortable experience. As William states, "Thank God for Campbell's Soup," which is an advertised brand that he is always able to recognize and select when shopping.

The role of memorization in creating a safe shopping experience is perhaps most evident when these strategies fail and consumers are unable to find a product or they bring home the wrong product:

And, a lot of times, you know, there are similar boxes. There might be a blue box that has potatoes in it and a yellow box that has scalloped potatoes. You know, they might pick up that blue box, and they like that blue box. And they might pick up that yellow box, and take it home and say, "We don't like that." Different color box that has different types of cheese (Michelle)

Because, you know, there are some things you get... I have done a couple of times. Well, maybe it is and maybe it ain't. You know, but we'll try.

And when you get it home, it's not. You don't make that purchase very often like that. (Michael)

Failure to find a product often resulted in anger and frustration. Some of the low literate consumers do ask for help when they unable find a product. But when the memorization strategy fails, the choice set is often reduced for the low literate consumers.

Mother's Day was very rough. But, I managed, though. I found a Mother's Day card. And, you know, it said a little comic on it. It's got a little picture of a comic strip. It really worked out good. It really did (Michael).

Drugstores comprise one outlet where consumers experience challenging and constrained choices. From selecting an appropriate OTC to combat cold symptoms to finding the easiest to use home diagnostic test kit, informants indicate a heavy reliance on visual information. While Tammy acknowledges her limited reading skills constrained her product choice in the pharmacy, Rebecca voices frustration at the relative sparseness of visual cues on pharmaceutical products.

I got the best one (home pregnancy kit) I could...It's got pictures on them. (Tammy)

Pharmacies don't have pictures. And, I look for things that have pictures so I can find it. But a lot of these bottles... and I've talked to people who does know how to read, and they have trouble finding things. But I think they need to put somehow pictures... put pictures on the labels, put pictures like this for colds. (Rebecca)

Restaurant patronage comprises another context of constrained choice. However, the increased use of pictured menus by restaurants increases the consumers' choice. When eating outside the home, restaurants where menus picture various food offerings receive high marks from the informants. An interview with George over lunch provided first-hand experience with this strategy. In my field notes I describe the interaction,

When we were trying to decide what to eat (before the actual real interview started) he was looking at the menu, which had a lot of pictures and he pointed to a roast beef sandwich that had fries and said, "Ooo that looks good." And I said, "Yeah, that does look good." And he said, "I think I want that." I said, "OK" "How much is it?" Well, across the side, the description matching, the description of the roast beef platter was not next to the picture it was 3 or 4 above it. So you had to look for it. And I told him how much it was and he said, "I can read. Oh, there it is!" He knew what the numbers were. (Field Notes, 7/01/00)

Fast food restaurants like Wendy's and McDonald's also facilitate the use of visual information by the low literate consumers through the use of pictorial menu boards. Michael told me while he uses the pictures, he usually will "order Number 1. Usually do, with an order of fries and diet Pepsi." Other informants commented on liking Chinese restaurants or places with a buffet where items are on display. Choosing selections that have tantalizing menu pictures is often used as a heuristic for judging food quality. As informants' reading skills improve, they face greater product and retail outlet choice.

I'm not A-1 reading yet, but I can read, you know. And, shop? It's wonderful. I like to shop. Now I don't have to go for the main brand anymore. But, I always went for the name brand because you know, at McDonalds, I have to thank them before I get Big Mac, French fries and Coke, I had that menu pat down. I don't eat Big Macs anymore. I'm sorry. Me and Big Mac we parted company. [laughing] (William)

Now, I have no hard time now. I'm not afraid doing it. My wife writes down on the piece of paper, and I go in the grocery store, find out what aisle stuff is in, and I go down, look at my paper and look on the, like green beans, or like spaghetti, or stuff like that. And, on the piece of paper, now I'm not afraid to start sounding off the letters and to find the right stuff now with the piece of paper. (Frank)

Well, I can go shopping by myself now. I can go anywhere by myself now. (George)

### **Repetitive Behaviors**

Most informants frequent a small number of retail establishments. Not only do many informants live in areas with a narrow range of retail outlets, about half of the informants do not have cars and must rely on other means of transportation including public transportation, walking, and rides from family or friends. These two factors work in concert to reduce the total number of stores that the informants' can patronize. Still, the informants have strong retail store preferences within this constrained choice set. The data reveal that the decision among outlets is dictated by the informants' level of comfort within the retail environment; retail comfort occurs when the store is familiar, the salespeople are helpful, and the decision-making is habitual.

By repeatedly going to the same stores, low literate consumers become familiar with the store's merchandise. During our conversation, Heather tells that her low literate relatives go to the same store "day in and day out" because they know the store and where to find the items they

want to purchase. In a similar fashion, Ginger reports that familiarity and efficiency motivate her retail store loyalty.

Yeah, I usually go to the same store because it's a lot easier. I know where is what, and what to find and where is what I need. So that saves me time. Especially if I'm riding the bus. If I go to a store, I know where they put things all I need. (Ginger)

Retail loyalty is also based on personalized relationships with store employees. Rebecca patronizes a local drugstore where she gets personal and helpful assistance. The relationships Bill developed in his business with a small group of suppliers proved invaluable to the success of his business.

Because they get familiar with you. And, you know, especially if they know you have a problem or something, they are helpful to you. Like the drugstore up here. I'm real familiar with the manager. And, they are real good about helping you out if they know you. I think if they know you more, they are willing to help. (Rebecca)

...I made sure that I ordered from a few, kept it to a minimum. ...I probably did less than a half a dozen. Where they was used to me and a lot of companies you didn't even have to... you could just tell them what you wanted. You didn't even have to give them a part number actually. They got so used to you, and after the years you could just call them up. (Bill)

Many informants shared stories about being known or recognized by the store employees and the positive feelings they obtain through the interaction.

Finally, habitual decision-making is another form of repetitive behavior that is a coping strategy. Quite a few of the low literate consumers indicate that their product choices are limited to products used previously. Purchasing the same items on subsequent trips becomes standard operating procedure. One informant can order with confidence at a local restaurant by ordering the same menu item:

...but I have been known to order the same things like pasghetti [sic] or something like that, because I *know* [emphasis added] it's there on the menu. (Rebecca)

Still, other informants spoke of mistakes resulting from purchasing something "new." Rebecca shared a story of buying French toast sticks thinking she was purchasing fish sticks, while Michelle and Paul tell of having to return to the store three times before buying the desired gas grill. It appears low literate consumers buy unfamiliar products on a limited basis. This is

best summarized in the words of one informant who stated, “Well, maybe it is and maybe it ain’t. You know, but we’ll try. And when you get it home, it’s not. You don’t make that purchase very often like that (Michael).” Thus, repetitive behavior occurs in going to the same stores and buying the same products.

### **Practice and Pre-planning Purchase Activities**

Several informants discussed the surrogate literacy skill of practicing or learning by trial and error. While less frequent in use than other strategies discussed, the practice strategy serves two main purposes for the low literate consumer. In addition to often helping the consumers to get their marketplace needs met, the strategy also helps low literate consumers gain confidence in various consumption related behaviors.

Practicing writing checks is one area in which many informants learn by trial and error. Many informants state writing checks as a personal goal in their quest for improved literacy skills. After practicing diligently, Bill reached this goal shortly after starting the literacy program. Others, like Frank, practice writing checks at home.

We work at home right now to write checks. I want to learn how to write the check. When my wife, maybe some day she gets sick, and maybe I don’t have no cash and I have to write the check. And, I know how to write the check and don’t be afraid.

Practicing a consumption-related behavior helps the low literate consumer become more at ease in the marketplace environment as poignantly illustrated in William’s account of preparing for a date some 30 years prior,

It’s funny, when I was young, 18, imagine asking somebody out for a date, and you got to find out what on the menu before you take the girl to there. You can sit down and say, “Yeah, we’ll have this.” I’ve gone in there, checked it out, made a dry run, and.... .Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Make a dry run. With a pretty girl you don’t want to make her look bad either.

In a slightly different way, informants “practiced” shopping trips prior to going to the store. Nearly two-thirds of the informants (14 out of 22) either prepare shopping lists or pre-plan their purchases. This coping strategy appears most often in discussions of the informants’ grocery shopping process and behaviors. Because the list is private in nature (i.e., no one else sees the shopping list), the accuracy of spelling is unimportant. As long as *they* know what it

“says” they are fine. Nancy provides an illustration of this practice when describing how she used to write lists, “Like, let’s say, sugar, S – U. That’s what I would call sugar. M – I, that would be milk. And then ice for ice cream. I mean flour, F – L.”

Repeatedly, informants express the idea of knowing what they want prior to entering the retail environment. For at least three informants, planning purchases also reduces the amount of time in the store. Darrell asserts writing a list helps him “run in and run out and get it.” Tina tells of needing a pair of jeans and knowing exactly where to find them. She says,

I just go in and buy what I gotta get and get out. ...I know what I need. I go get it, and go home. (Tina)

Alan provides another example when telling of a recent purchase of a weed trimmer from a home improvement store. When asked how he knew what to purchase, he replied:

Because before I go, I know what I’m after, what I’m looking for or I don’t go to the stores.

Due to several informants’ constrained resources, planning purchases becomes a necessity in order to keep tabs on spending. Constrained resources necessitate informants to be mindful of their needs, plan ahead, and implement strategies to make sure that their limited resources go as far as they need to go. Expecting a small family reunion later in the month, Sarah tells of having to anticipate what she will need for the entire month and purchase items in advance so she “wouldn’t run out of money.”

Thus, planning what to buy serves not only as a reminder, but also as a means to increase their comfort in various marketplace environments. Additionally, since most informants operate with constrained financial resources, using lists helps informants manage their resources and maintain control over their purchases.

### **Shopping Help**

At times, the low literate consumer depends on someone else to provide him or her with reading assistance. Virtually all of the informants disclosed the person who provided them with reading assistance.

The choice to use a shopping helper or reader requires that the low literate consumer divulge their reading difficulties. A few informants relayed their painstaking decision of when to tell a “significant other,” and in one case, an informant kept his literacy problems hidden from his wife for over 14 years of marriage. By far, the most common shopping helper is a family member or a friend who is “like family,” and may have first-hand knowledge of the informants’ reading difficulties. Not surprisingly, the data suggests that informants draw upon their social resources and those people whom they trust.

Alan comments that his wife Amy helps him out and says, “I don’t have someone else do that.” Each of the currently married informants indicated some level of support from their spouses as a shopping helper or reader. Prior to her marriage to Paul, Michelle’s father “automatically” served as her shopping helper. She puts it this way,

My dad’s always took care of me ...before I got on my own...I’d just give him the money...he took care of me.... .I just gave him the money and let him... he just knowed what we need to eat or what we need to pay.

Similarly, Chris assigns his mother the role of shopping helper as the following quote illustrates, “...‘Cause I don’t do that much reading at the store. Because, that’s again my Mama’s job to do the shopping.” Several informants talk about “buddies” and neighbors who routinely help them out with reading and shopping tasks. One task that informants mention repeatedly as requiring assistance from others, is writing checks. Tina describes the long-term relationship she developed with a woman at her bank who befriended her and helped her with check writing. She also depends on her roommate who, as Tina relays, “She does my checkbook for me, now. And she (the roommate) says, ‘We are going to learn this. You need to know how to do a checkbook.’”

While the majority of informants spoke positively of receiving shopping help from family members and friends, five women voiced concern over the practice. Stories from three of the women, now divorced, suggest that providing reading assistance or shopping help allowed the helpers to exercise undue control over them. Nancy and Opal discuss how their ex-husbands helped with the shopping activities:

But all during this time, my husband always... I’d always bring a check home every week and he’d cash it and do whatever. He would never teach me. He wouldn’t let me pay bills or anything. (Nancy)

Yeah. He wrote the checks. He paid the bills. He would go to the store with me, in that sense. In the financial senses, he did most of it. (Opal)

In both of these instances, the women cited a desire to be able to “take care of myself” and “pay my own bills” as motivators for seeking literacy assistance. Although beyond the scope of this research, it appears limited support for Darden’s (1993) work, on co-dependency and the impact of one partner seeking literacy help on the family relationship dynamics exists.

A fourth informant, Heather, serves as a shopping helper for her mother and other relatives with literacy deficits. While her mother routinely depends on Heather for shopping assistance, particularly with knowing how much money to give the cashier, she occasionally expresses frustration when Heather points out a mistake has been made. Heather tells of her mother’s reaction when Heather points out the cashier did not give her enough change back from her purchases,

She gets mad at me. She’ll say, “Just leave me the Hell alone.” I says, “No, mom. Because it’s hurting you, and he’s gotta understand.”

In addition to asking for help from close family member and friends, informants often needed to ask for help from people in the retail environment, including store employees and fellow shoppers. Rebecca says that in some cases, in order to get her needs met within the marketplace, she has to ask someone for help.

The data suggest that requests for assistance in the marketplace can be categorized into two types: normal requests and requests that could potentially reveal literacy difficulties. In the first category, it should be noted that asking for assistance in the marketplace does not always pose a risky situation for the informants. At times, the request for assistance is due to time constraints, moved merchandise, or merchandise selection. Several informants share their motivations for asking for help from the store employees,

Well, if I can’t find it, I ask. I mean, it’s not that.... You know, they may not have it. And to me, when I go hunt something, and I can’t find it right away, then I ask for help. Because if I’m interested in one particular item, I’m not going to run around through the store for an hour and a half huntin’ and they don’t have it. (Alan)

Well, I have to ask where it’s at. You know, I’ll look for it, and then if I can’t find it, I go for help. That’s what they are there for. (Sarah)

Well, if I do, I get as far as I can, I say, “Will you help me with this?” That’s what I do. It’s the only thing I know to do. (Olive)

In fact, it also seems that as informants obtain additional literacy skills through the adult programs, they are more willing to take the risk of asking. The informants’ overall self-confidence increases and they do not see asking for help as revealing a horrible stigma but as a normal request that normal people make.

In other situations, informants revealed their literacy problems to the store employee or fellow shopper. Several of the informants who report disclosing their literacy difficulties to strangers when seeking reading assistance in the marketplace serve as spokespeople for the various literacy programs. In fact, rather than being evaluated negatively, some informants receive positive feedback in the form of awe and respect (Field notes, March 13 and July 3, 2000).

Revealing literacy difficulties when asking for help occurs more frequently as the informants work towards skill improvement. Several informants share tales of their experiences asking for reading help while in the marketplace.

One thing we have learned, if we are not sure of what something is, or how to pronounce it, we just ask. I mean, because I found out you would be surprised at the people who don’t know how to pronounce something. Or how many times something is mispronounced because they are not sure. I’m brave enough, I just ask. (Amy)

But now, when I stop and ask people for their help, I come right out now and say I have a hard time reading, and I’m in the program, the reading program. Do you mind helping me? And they say no they don’t mind. And after they help me, I tell them thank you very, very much. (Frank)

If I have problems, if there are people around, I’ll ask them if they have problems reading like I do. And, if they can read, if I see or hear them read... if you listen, you can hear them read to herself, and I’ll walk up to her and say, “Can you read this to me? I have trouble reading.” (Jeff)

On the flip side, asking for help can be a threatening social encounter in which literacy deficits may be revealed. Some informants admit to being afraid to ask for assistance because they did not want someone else finding out about their reading problems. When questioned if, prior to his involvement with LVA, he asked for shopping help, William responds, “No, ma’am.

To be honest, no. Because I kept it to myself.” Tina tells of the fear she felt when deciding to ask for help,

I know a lot of times, I can speak for myself. I don’t know about other people. But, for me, I would usually ask the person working there. And, sometimes it was kind of scary. Because I got to approach this person. I’ve got to give this person a little bit of information.

A few informants would whisper questions to salespeople. The data suggest that people whispered their requests when they assumed they would have to admit their literacy difficulties. Unfortunately, whispering often leads to the store employees needing to have the question repeated and ironically increases attention. Few of the informants used this technique perhaps because of its limited effectiveness. Alternatively, since the informants were gaining confidence in their literacy skills with the adult literacy training, perhaps they were more comfortable asking for help.

### **Avoidance**

The data support previous findings that suggest low literate consumers make conscious decisions to do without a product or to avoid some marketplace environments. The majority of informants were aware of this strategy and had used it. Doing without products or avoiding specific marketplace encounters occurs because of either limited financial resources or literacy deficits or some combination thereof.

During discussions of Figure 2 in the modified-TAT section of the interviews, many informants told of having to do without something because they did not have enough money to purchase it. Several informants admit having to put items back because of insufficient funds. Sarah tells that she will do without an allergy medication after taking all of the samples given by her physician due to budgetary constraints.

At other times, deficits in literacy skills necessitate informants having to do without products. As Nancy states, “we all have something we avoid. Because of our reading problems.” For many informants, specific retail outlets, as well as specialized purchase situations, were intimidating and needed to be avoided.

Due to several informants' medical conditions, local pharmacies constitute a frequent outlet visited. This outlet and the products in the outlet generate significant apprehension for the low literate consumers. In nearly all cases, informants expressed trepidation when discussing the third picture in the modified TAT and their experiences in the outlet.

Similarly, for several years, Tina avoided getting an automatic transaction card for her checking account because she was "scared to death of them. Because [she] knew it had a PIN number" that she would have to read and memorize. Michelle also did without extra things, not because of a lack of financial resources, but because, she avoided shopping situations where her reading skills may be called into question. Her income went to pay known bills including rent and her car payment. Her father helped her get the groceries she needed, but she avoided all unnecessary purchases. William also actively avoided purchase situations where reading skills would be necessary. In his own words,

No, ma'am. I will not buy it. I only bought, at the time, if necessary, like food. And clothing. That's the main thing. And, anything else, I didn't buy that, because you had to read...

While limited financial resources plague many of the low literate informants, across informants the data reveal a strong preference for using cash only in order to avoid having to write checks or use credit cards. Although some informants occasionally write checks, often with the some assistance as described in "Shopping Helpers" above, they prefer to use cash whenever possible.

Alan reasons that it holds up the checkout line when people write checks and since he has a hard time writing them, he uses cash instead. Several informants describe difficulties in writing checks due to literacy challenges. Nancy is self-conscious when writing a check and she pays "cash for everything." Similarly, Frank operates on a cash-only basis when he shops without his wife. And Darrell purchases his groceries with cash and reimburses his sister for the checks she writes to cover his bills such as cable and phone.

Some of the informants use a technique called the dollar method to make sure they have enough cash once they get to the cash register. For nearly twenty years, this method serves Rebecca well. She tells how the method works,

And you say, 89 cents, you count it as a dollar. You have a box here that says 69 cents, count it as a dollar. You find a product that's \$1.19. You count it as a dollar too because these products is going to take it. And then if it's like \$1.89, it would be \$2.00. \$2.99 would be \$3.00. And, just dollar everything as you go in the store. ...It works for me. But I dollar everything. Then I don't have a problem... do I have enough? You count money. (Rebecca)

Thus, by employing a cash-only strategy, low literate consumers avoid many of the problems associated with paying for items, such as knowing how to fill out a check. This strategy, however, can fail and may result in other types of problems for the low literate consumer depending on the specific literacy levels and abilities of the consumer. A dominant theme of trust in the marketplace emerges when informants talk about potential problems of using cash. As Jeff explains, other low literate consumers who possess problems dealing with cash, accept the assistance they receive on good faith.

...they usually know what they have. They have the bank people put it in order. And when they go out, they usually keep it in their pockets. They know what they take out. Or someone in their family give them X amount of money and say this is what you got. But how do you know your teller is not cheating you too? You don't know that. Because you have to take it in trust.

Heather shares a story about the problems her mother faces "all the time" in the marketplace when people who know that her mother "can't read or can't count or nothing, and they try to take advantage of her,"

And, well, like she can't count. And, one day I was into the store with her, and she bought 2 boxes of cereal for \$5.00. And, she gave the guy a \$10.00 bill. And the guy didn't give her the change back. Well, which two boxes of cereal was only \$5.00. So, I went back and I got onto his back about it. I told him, I says, "Well, where's her change?" And, he felt kind of bad, you know, trying to cheat her, but he did give her \$5.00 change back. [laughing]... ....Well, I've seen her when she went into the store, to get a 12 pack of beer, or whatever, and the price was like \$4.99. Well, she would turn around and she'd hand the guy like \$7.00 and she would just walk out and she wouldn't wait for her change or nothing. Because she didn't think that she had change coming back, but the cashier noticed that he had the change, and he just pocketed.

## Non-disclosure

Although on occasion low literate consumers reveal their literacy difficulties to social others, in many instances they avoid such disclosures. More than two-thirds of the informants explain various ways low literate consumers achieve marketplace needs while utilizing a non-disclosure coping strategy. The non-disclosure coping strategies occurred by either indirect omission or by direct deception. In both situations, the data suggest a motivating factor in choosing one of these strategies to be avoiding the appearance of being abnormal; that is, they desire to appear like “everyone else.”

Rather than openly disclose their literacy difficulties, many informants simply withhold this information. One informant became visibly emotional as he told of withholding this information from the person he had committed to sharing his life,

One of the things that he [Bill] did mention was that he and his wife have been married almost thirty years. They had been married about fourteen years before his wife found out that he had problems reading and writing... she quickly became one of his biggest supporters in his quest for improved skills. He was very emotional. There were times when he started to cry so I couldn't... I had to turn off the tape recorder and let him compose himself before continuing. (Field notes, March 13, 2000)

Bill also utilized the non-disclosure strategy in other aspects of his life. For example, Bill worked, as the owner of a motorcycle repair shop and instructor at the vocational-technical school, and interacted with various people in the community. For years, he successfully concealed his reading problems. When asked how he managed to keep knowledge of his limited literacy skills from others, Bill replies, “they’d never ask.” Even in situations when literacy was required, Bill attributes the inattention of others as the reason for the success of the non-disclosure strategy. Illustrations of non-disclosure by omission, suggest low literate consumers’ may seek to foster an image of competence, education, and intelligence, as reflected in the words of Ginger and Jeff.

The way I put myself. I didn’t look like that I was not educated. Usually they thought I went to school and high school, the way I put myself. The way I, you know. They never thought of it. (Ginger)

You know, with my skills and stuff, you wouldn’t even notice anything. ...Because my skills, I could read. Like Kiwanis. They thought I was real intelligent. (Jeff)

Non-disclosure strategies also include deliberate attempts to mislead or deceive. Throughout the interviews, informants identify several alibis routinely used to hide insufficient literacy skills. The most frequently identified deceptive non-disclosure strategy is to suggest visual impairment. Most informants indicate knowing someone who claimed to have “forgotten” their glasses and, in many cases, used this technique themselves. Many informants perceived this as a common way that low literates get through the awkwardness of situations when they are asked to read, sign, or find something in the marketplace. Low literate adults who had some type of visual impairment used this strategy heavily, so sometimes the visual impairment excuse is an instance of omission while other times it is an instance of deception.

Several informants give examples of additional deceptive non-disclosure strategies including claims of: hands hurting, forgetting, having a headache, forgetting how to spell a number, or not wanting to make the decision alone. As a case in point, consider Rebecca’s account of using a non-disclosure coping strategy,

I try to be like, if I don’t understand something, I will have someone else look over it. I have done that. And, like, if somebody is trying to get you to buy something, I always drag my feet about buying it... (Natalie: How do you drag your feet?) By saying like, “I’ve got to go talk to my husband.” Or something like that. And let him look it over, or my brother or something. My brother is an accountant. (Rebecca)

Due to the pervasive use of non-disclosure coping strategies, many of the strategies become identifiers of other people with limited literacy deficits. For example, Tina explains she can tell that the worker of a roadside vegetable stand has reading problems by his actions and words. In a similar fashion, William shares a portion of his conversation with a friend trying to get a friend to face his reading difficulties,

I used the same alibis they do. And, I know as soon as they begin telling me, I know what they are. They can’t read and they are going to swear they could. So, I saw a friend of mine in Church, I said, “[Name], see if you can read it.” ...We stood there for 10 minutes. I told my buddy that he couldn’t read and I told him about LVA. That’s all I can do is offer him the help. He said, “Oh, it’s my eyes.” I said, “It ain’t your eyes, buddy. It ain’t that. It ain’t your eyes. You gotta admit to yourself you need help. If you do, you can get it.” He said, “Maybe. That’s only maybe.” I said, “how long have you been using that, ‘maybe’? Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week. Before you know it, years go by and you are still using ‘maybe tomorrow’. 10 years go by and you’ve got the same

line. I used the same line for 50 years. And, you ain't telling me nothing, buddy." (William)

## **Deflection**

By deflecting attention away from their reading skills and on to other skills, such as manual dexterity, arithmetic aptitude, and expanding computer competency, informants maneuver themselves into a more favorable light. This strategy of refocusing attention and energy on to other skills seems to build the informants' self-confidence.

Many informants took pride in their ability to manage money. While Frank struggles with reading, he says, "I used to have a paper route... ..And, my dad teached [sic] me what the dollar means and all the money means." William proudly attests that his monetary skills make him less vulnerable:

Now one thing about me, I knew money. I could pay. I knew what money was. I didn't have no problem with money. The man told me it was \$30, I can pull out three \$10 bills, that's \$30. So that's no problem with money. My problem was with reading. The main problem. But, money and thinking, I was good at. But if you imagine someone who couldn't read, couldn't count money, you know... then you gotta understand, somebody who can't count money, you might give the man a \$50 bill and he'll give you \$2 back. You wouldn't know any different. (William)

Similarly, other informants gave examples of their ability to calculate sale prices and both William and Michael shared detailed descriptions of their ability to calculate the required amount of building materials for home improvement projects. Many informants take great pride in their mathematical abilities and, as one informant puts it "would probably hate" not knowing how to calculate prices and do marketplace math.

Within the interview, some of the informants directed the questions back to areas of competence: that is, Bill who has very poor literacy skills, stressed his automotive mechanical skills and Heather, who has higher literacy skills, shared her computer internet surfing skills. Other skills that were amplified included memorization, humor, and nonliterate communication.

I think God gave me a skill to picture mind... Like if you showed me something right now, say, like this drawing here, I can sit here, once I looked at that, and redraw that for you. That's what you call a picture mind. That's what I have. (Jeff)

...I was always called the class clown because I was always acting out. And the reason I was acting out, was because I wanted to learn too. ...  
...Yeah. By not being able to read or write. How do you think I got as far as I am now? I mean, I'm 39 years old. You know, I did pretty good. I did pretty good at faking people out, you know. (Tina)

Summary. In this chapter, findings from the data suggest low literacy is experienced as a stigma that impacts multiple life domains of the informants. The stigma results in assaults on the low literate adults' feeling of self-worth that become quite pronounced over time. Literacy difficulties also complicate the low literate consumers' abilities to meet daily needs in the marketplace. The coping behaviors identified in this research negate many of the consequences of the stigma. Several coping strategies (e.g., memorization, shopping helpers, repetitive behavior, planned purchases) assist low literate consumers in fulfilling their daily marketplace needs. Avoidance, non-disclosure, and deflection, however, primarily serve as self-protective strategies guarding against the impact of repetitive negative evaluations.

In the following chapter, the analysis on both low literacy as a stigma and the various coping behaviors in which low literate consumers engage, is presented in a conceptual framework to increase our knowledge and understanding of the low literate consumer's behavior in the marketplace.