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PORTraits OF ADJUSTMENT

MARTIN HEESACKER

The Washington Post

WRITERS GROUP

Portraits of Adjustment

Martin Heesacker, Editor
University of Florida

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Portraits of Adjustment

Preface

Portraits of Adjustment is designed to be a supplemental reader for college and university courses with titles such as Psychology of Adjustment, Personal Adjustment, Personal Development, Personal Growth, and Toward Self-understanding. More than most college courses, these adjustment courses simultaneously provide academic content and immediate, personally relevant tools for enhancing your quality of life, both during college and beyond. This dual function of academic course and life enhancer makes the content demands different from those of typical college courses. This different set of demands will be reflected in the content and style of your instructor's lectures, but it should also be reflected in the content and style of the books and other materials you receive in the course.

For adjustment courses to achieve their life-enhancing function, all your course materials must be scientifically accurate and clearly written, but they also must be timely and tied to your real concerns. Your textbook, as good as it may be, cannot fulfill the goals of timeliness and real-world relevance very well. That's where *Portraits* comes in. *Portraits* has been developed specifically to give additional timeliness and relevance to your adjustment course materials.

What exactly is *Portraits*? It is a book of recent *Washington Post* newspaper articles on important issues related to adjustment. These articles are organized according to the standard topics covered in adjustment textbooks.

Why do you need both *Portraits* and the textbook? *Portraits* complements the mission of your adjustment textbook in four ways.

1. *Portraits* provides the most up-to-date developments in the field, developments that may take years to be reflected in your textbook.
2. *Portraits* exemplifies the dynamic nature of scientific discovery and the advance of knowledge. The articles provide snapshots of how knowledge evolves. In the textbook, controversies are not usually given much attention. Knowledge is often presented as a finished product. *Portraits* shows you the controversy, confusion, and struggle that are natural, but sometimes hidden, aspects of emerging knowledge.
3. By showing you recent news stories that connect directly with your adjustment textbook topics, *Portraits* can help you decide what material from the course will

be useful in your future and therefore what material is worth incorporating into your own life.

4. I also hope that *Portraits* will show that through conscientiously reading a good, local newspaper, such as the *Washington Post*, you can keep up with important scientific and social developments after your last college class has ended and for the rest of your life.

How did I select these articles? At least two students and I rated every article in *Portraits*. We gave each article a letter grade (*A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, or *F*) on six dimensions: (1) Is it tied to students' real world concerns? (2) Is it interesting? (3) Would a student enjoy it? (4) Is it current? (5) Is it clearly written? and (6) Does it appear to have scientific validity? Out of hundreds of articles, I have selected the articles we rated highest in each topic. These articles had ratings that averaged in the "A" to "B+" range.

Introductions to each section tie the themes of individual *Portraits*' readings. One- or two-sentence descriptions of each article tell you the basic point of the article. Multiple-choice and short-answer questions about each article help you decide whether you read it carefully enough. Discussion questions about each article help you and your instructor integrate what you are learning from lectures, book chapters, and *Portraits*.

I have examined each of the textbooks most likely to be used in these adjustment courses, and I have based the contents of *Portraits* on the topics they cover. I think *Portraits* covers the textbook topics fairly comprehensively. So, for most of the key themes in your course, there ought to be at least one *Portraits*' article that brings that theme to life.

For example, when you read in your textbook about research methods, you will be reading in *Portraits* about a controversy over the accuracy of a recent sex survey. When you are reading about development in your textbook, you will be reading in *Portraits* about the psychological importance of adolescent rites of passage into adulthood. When you read about motivation in your textbook, you will be reading in *Portraits* about the recent research on underachieving students and about black students who have been criticized for "acting white," because they are motivated to do well in school. I hope you enjoy and benefit from reading these articles as much as my associates and I have.

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I would like to thank Holly Bielstein, Patricia Blake, Patricia Hasper, Shauna Hilk, Terry Jennings, Myra Marion-Lewis, Jeff Wentzel, and especially Jennifer Sauer for their help in varied aspects of this project, from deciding what topics to include in *Portraits* to the final proofreading. Most of these people are former students of my Personal Growth class, and they have developed a good sense of what is both interesting to students and important for an adjustment course. I would also like to thank my secretary Robert Goodholm for preparing the manuscript, Robert Lyford for his able help in searching the *Washington Post* database, and especially Allyn and Bacon's Kevin Stone, who initiated my interest in this project and helped me throughout.

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Section I

Foundation Issues

Foundation issues are the basic building blocks of psychology. These topics form the intellectual foundation on which the field of psychological adjustment rests. Foundation issues include scientific research methods, human development, and motivation—topics that are often more interesting to faculty than to students! So, I have tried to select articles that will help students really see what professors find interesting about this field.

In the scientific research method section, I have chosen articles that describe interesting controversies associated with social science research. The first of the five articles on scientific research methods explores the accuracy and value of those national sex surveys we all love to read about. The second article shows how politically charged social science can be. In this case, the Bush White House wanted to stop publication of a study that showed a rise in drug use. The third article echoes that same theme on the local level. Some parents and some school officials oppose a survey of teenagers about their “risky” behaviors (such as unsafe sex and drug abuse), suggesting it invades students’ privacy. The fourth article discusses the methodological problems associated with an international comparison of students’ math and science knowledge. U.S. students do not fare well, but the student groups from different countries may not be comparable. The final article in this group suggests that research on women’s self-esteem may be inaccurate because much of it has been based on a male perspective.

The three human development articles touch on developmental issues ranging from adolescent to old-age issues. My goal in selecting these was to “spice up” the normal coverage of human development with unusual and newly emerging issues in human development. The first human development article documents an alarming trend among adolescents toward a more pessimistic view about life and the future.

The second article describes rites of passage, often forgotten in our modern society, that signify and ease the transition from childhood to adulthood. The final human development article documents the growth in the elderly population and explores the impact that four-generation families will have on society.

The three motivation articles look at three distinct faces of motivation: irrational motivation, conflicted motivations, and undermotivation. They begin with an article on the irrational motivations that often influence people's stock market decisions. The second article is about the conflict that academically motivated black students sometimes experience when their peers accuse them of "acting white." The final article in the motivation group documents the prevalence of underachievement in school-age students and analyzes why work inhibition occurs.

Scientific Theory and Research Methods

1

When Sex Is a Statistic

If Surveys Go All the Way, Do You
Respect Them in the Morning?

DON OLDENBURG

The value of sex surveys is explored, along with their impact on the general public. Several prominent sociologists and psychologists offer their opinions on the need for accuracy in surveys, as well as their effects on everyday living. —Ed.

Last month, when release of the controversial “Janus Report on Sexual Behavior” raised eyebrows nationwide with its findings that Americans were doing more and doing it more often behind bedroom doors, Midwesterners were informed that they weren’t doing much at all.

When it comes to frequency of sexual intercourse, it seems that Midwesterners go gentle into that good night only to roll over and fall asleep. The survey found that, on the average, they had less sex and fewer partners than other Americans. Forty-four percent described themselves as “very active” or “active” sexually (meaning a few times a week), compared to 53 percent elsewhere; and 22 percent scored as sexually below average or altogether inactive.

Perhaps more surprising, however, was that Midwesterners seemed resigned to the limp libido assessment. “That’s about the most accurate thing that ever came along,” says Melanie Gray, a reporter and editor at the *Kansas City Star* whose amused response to the findings were headlined “Hotblooded? No, We’re Luke-warm.”

While some readers who telephoned the newspaper about the report accused other regions of lying about their prowess, most rationalized their own sluggish hormones. They pinned their low rating on religion, on the work ethic, even on weather. Their comments fueled a story three weeks later in the *Star* about young and middle-aged Midwestern couples who hadn't had sexual intercourse in years.

"The heartland is filled with romance. But sex? Come on!" says Gray, who in her article reassured readers that there were "no right or wrong figures" between the sheets. "Speaking as a Nebraskan, it's true, though," she says. "We probably won't have sex again until the next survey results come out."

Which means Midwesterners may have seen some action last week when another national sex survey hit the streets. This one, conducted by the Battelle Human Affairs Research Centers, focused on men in their twenties and thirties.

As a measure of sexual appetite, it had comforting news for any worried Midwesterners: The study indicated the whole country was more moderate in the bedroom than commonly thought. Men in the surveyed age range said they have intercourse with women, on average, only about once a week. Action in the bedroom may be down for everyone, but the frequency of bigger and supposedly better sex surveys is on the rise. As they prod the public with more and more statistics quantifying how many times, with how many partners, in what positions, one obvious question still goes begging: Was it good for you?

Not the sex.

The sex survey.

The effect of survey findings on the everyday lives of ordinary human beings isn't foremost in the minds of most sex researchers, who see their work primarily as vital to sexologists and policy makers who need accurate assessments for tackling today's health and social problems. But for the average American, does knowing the number of times "the average American" makes love per week make a difference? And, if it does, is it for better or for worse?

Robin Tunnicliff regularly reads sex survey results in magazines and newspapers with "a modicum of interest," but she doesn't agonize over comparisons. "A lot of them might have information that's new and shocking to me about what people do behind closed doors, and I wonder if I should be doing that, too," says the 31-year-old Washington-based freelance reporter. "I do read the monthly ones in *Glamour*, like what positions people are enjoying the most. And, honestly, I think 'There's an idea! Now if I could just find the right man.'"

Says a 40-year-old professional woman who lives in suburban Virginia: "I don't pay attention to that tripe, but I think other people do. A housewife I knew a few years ago got into an affair because she thought she was missing out on something. She had read this trash and thought it played out in real life. And she ended up divorced."

Many social scientists believe sex surveys can provide the public with useful information. They insist surveys provide Americans with everything they want to