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Literacy and illiteracy, its relational other: A key topic for collaboration between psychology and anthropology

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Abstract
Collaborative work between anthropology and psychology on literacy and particularly on illiteracy helps to rethink general disciplinary backgrounds, concepts, and complex empirical phenomena in the field of (il)literacy. Since the formational period of the social sciences, the concept of literacy has been key to the self-understandings of anthropology and psychology. However, it was long neglected in empirical research. Nonetheless, implicit and explicit assumptions about the role, history, and distinctiveness of writing systems and their presence or absence in various societies were central to disciplinary understandings of societies, individuals, and humanity. To this day, literacy and especially its relational other—illiteracy—have not received the attention they deserve from either empirical or conceptual research. This article begins with their histories in anthropology and psychology and argues that illiteracy, in particular, has been neglected in their debates. It then offers a framework for literacizing and illiteracizing, conceptualizes both illiteracy and literacy as multiple and relational phenomena, and discusses methodologies and preliminary results from our collaborative research project on processes of literacizing and illiteracizing in urban literate environments in Benin and Bolivia. It concludes with a discussion of the potential of research on literacy and illiteracy as a model for transdisciplinary work, especially a more intensive collaboration between our disciplines.

KEYWORDS
Benin, Bolivia, illiteracy, literacy, multiplicity, relationality, transdisciplinarity

INTRODUCTION

Historically, only exceptional people have been able to read and write, and thus to act as autonomous authors of books or letters, and as late as the mid-20th-century, more than half of the world's population was considered illiterate (Lyons, 2022, 1). Depending on how classifications of literate and illiterate are determined or perceived and where boundaries are drawn, these numbers might be higher or lower, but even today numerous people in both industrialized and less industrialized countries—possibly still even half of the world population—are not able, for example, to fill out bureaucratic forms without help.

At the same time, the production of academic scholarship about humanity and its history, for obvious reasons, takes place from the perspective of what Lyons (2022, 1) has called "graphocentric western intellectuals": people whose profession was and is to read and write and for whom literacy is standard. It may be due to the inherent bias of such intellectuals that much more has been written on literacy and literates than on processes, situations, or people for whom writing was or is (largely) absent, not necessary, lacking, or even something to refuse and combat.

This epistemic bias towards literacy, which assumes it to be the norm for human society, can be traced in the histories of our disciplines as well. Since the formational period of the social sciences in the 19th century, literacy has been important for an epistemic self-understanding of various disciplines and has been important in defining the boundaries between them. Certain implicit or explicit assumptions about the roles of writing systems, histories, and distinctiveness—including their presence or absence in any given society and a tendency to see illiteracy as a deviation from the norm of literacy—were central to disciplinary understandings of societies, individuals, and humanity. This holds particularly for both our disciplines, social anthropology and psychology, even if literacy as a genuine and explicit research topic has not been central to them like kinship, religion, and economy or attachment, intelligence, and aggression. However, we want to demonstrate in a short epistemic history of (il)literacy in our disciplines that literacy and illiteracy are key to an often-unspoken self-understanding. While in social anthropology looking at (il)literate *societies* and the assumed transformation to literate societies was central, in psychology *individual* development from illiteracy to literacy was key to understanding human individual transformation from childhood to "real" adulthood. In both disciplines and others (for example, for history, see Lyons, 2022, and for linguistics, see Gee, 1991), there was a tendency to connect literacy to the "mature," "real," or "developed" way of being human.

Our collaboration as an anthropologist and a psychologist working together on a project on illiteracy in Benin and Bolivia and joint reflections on our disciplinary backgrounds have shown us that illiteracy—or better: processes of illiteracizing—may have been blind spots in the debates. This is not only helping us to rethink our disciplinary backgrounds but also to better understand the complex realities in both of our case studies.

Our article is based on these reflections. We want to demonstrate that the often-neglected field of (il)literacy might be an exceptionally rich field of inquiry to bring anthropology and psychology together, both methodically and conceptually. What we have learned in this way is presented in this article.

In the following, we first look at the histories of literacy in anthropology and psychology; next, we conceptualize illiteracy and literacy as multiple and relational phenomena. We then present our collaborative research on processes of literacizing and illiteracizing in urban literate environments in El Alto/La Paz (Bolivia) and Parakou (Northern Benin) and conclude by discussing research on literacy and illiteracy as a potential model for transdisciplinary work.

LITERACY AND ILLITERACY IN THE EPISTEMIC HISTORIES OF OUR DISCIPLINES

Assumptions on writing systems and literacy—as well as illiteracy, its relational other—have long been present in—even foundational to—the historical development of the social sciences. However, until the late 20th century, they remained largely implicit. The discipline of social and cultural anthropology, for

instance, assumed a distinction between "illiterate" societies, seen as stateless and often as lacking history and "civilized" societies with state structures and bureaucracies—and thus writing systems (see below). These were either seen as "modern" (Europe, the United States), or as ancient civilizations (China, India, etc.). In postcolonial critique, this assumed "great divide" (Bartlett et al., 2011, 155)—whose prominent exponents included Eric Havelock (1903–1988), Walter J. Ong (1912–2003), and Jack Goody (1919–2015), at least in his early work—has often been labeled as the divide between "the West" and "the Rest" (Hall, 2019). It remains productive in many disciplines and, despite much criticism (see, for instance Ferguson, 2011), continues to be reproduced in para-academic writing (see, for instance Sewpaul, 2016). The presumed binary opposition between literate and illiterate societies or literate and illiterate minds that lies at the heart of this distinction remains productive, not only outside but often also inside academic research.

In its formative era, the discipline of anthropology came to understand itself as responsible for the study of "illiterate" societies, with disciplines like sinology, Indology, or Islamic studies studying "societies of ancient literacy" (and, in their later shape, also modern "oriental" societies), and the emerging discipline of sociology analyzing "modern" literate societies. This anthropological perspective depended on defining literacy as a characteristic of whole societies, with the existence of a writing system indicating a literate society and its absence an illiterate one. This self-understanding was accompanied by an evolutionist temporal framework that imagined human history as a development from "illiterate" to "literate" societies and from a mythical or primitive logic of "savage minds" (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) to the rational, literate modern individual. Although this evolutionist discourse has been widely criticized and structuralist approaches rejected, its dichotomy between logic based on literacy and mythical thinking based on illiteracy continued to be seen as a principal distinction of the human brain (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) or (in structural functionalists' somewhat "softened" version) as distinct but not as a part of human temporal development (Goody, 1969). Thus, binaries between "us" and "them," "the rural" and "the urban," "the ones in the centers" and "the ones in the peripheries," "the educated" and "the ignorant," or the "West" and "the Rest" took the place of the temporal narratives of "before" and "after" and "traditional" and "modern," while perpetuating binaries between distinct ways of reasoning. Of course, we do not mean to imply that literacy does not affect minds and societies at all (for one differentiated conceptualization of the "literate mind" or "literate consciousness," see Jens Brockmeier, 1997; for the complex role of literacy and literacies on identity and subjectivity, see Collins & Blot, 2005). However, the idea that literacy itself determines specific mentalities or societal formations, which Brian Street (1993, 5) has called "the autonomous model of literacy" (see also Bartlett et al., 2011, 156), must be rejected.

The attribution of literacy to whole societies in the discipline of anthropology is contradicted by historical research showing that the ability to read and write has often been limited to a rather small part of the population around the world, including Europe. Rather, the vision of a whole society being literate accompanied the large-scale introduction of universal compulsory schooling in the 18th and 19th centuries (Lyons, 2022, 59–77).

Similarly, literacy rates did not necessarily correlate with high social status: in early-twentieth-century South Africa, for instance, Black migrant mine workers were more likely to be able to read and write, and to correspond with their families, than Boers (Krüger, 2009). Such historical work has also radically challenged another narrative about illiterate societies: that of "people without history" (Wolf, 1982) characterized by a strictly oral transmission of knowledge from the past (although this again does not imply that the prevalence of specific forms of literacy in a society has no significance in shaping uses of the past).

This narrative of a "great divide" in humanity based on an opposition between literacy and illiteracy also contributed greatly to what Graff (1979) has called the "literacy myth": the attribution of a wide variety of social, political, and economic goods and societal markers to literacy (Graff 1979; see also Bartlett et al., 2011, 156; and Lyons, 2022, 1–15, for corresponding "illiteracy myths"), as if it were some kind of universal key.

However, even though foundational concepts for the discipline of anthropology, like illiterate societies and a "great divide," were organized around notions of literacy and societies without history, for a long time there was little intensive empirical field research on this subject, even after the empirical turn to fieldwork following Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) and the important work of Jack Goody. The topic

only really took off with the (New) Literacy Studies in the late 20th century. We will return to this later, after looking at the role of literacy in the discipline of psychology.

Mainstream psychology has historically ignored literacy and illiteracy: literacy was just taken for granted, which to some extent remains the case today. For example, in the formative decades of scientific psychology at the end of the 19th century, the Würzburg School of Oswald Külpe (1862–1915), Karl Marbe (1869–1953), Narziß Ach (1871–1946), Karl Bühler (1879–1963), and others conducted experiments whose participants had to have specific and wide-ranging qualifications to generate "valid" data through introspection. This method was always controversial: in effect, only psychologists themselves could be proper research subjects, and only members of the Würzburg School itself could participate in each other's experiments (Holzkamp, 1983, 544).

Likewise, the tradition of genetic structuralism principally inaugurated by Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and Bärbel Inhelder (1913–1997) never questioned literacy as a given. Only later, when the universalist claims of Piaget's developmental cognitive theory were tested in cultural contexts beyond Geneva and other Swiss cities, was the dependence of this stage theory on formal schooling and literacy questioned more and more insistently. Examples include Gustav Jahoda's (1920–2016) relatively early studies in Ghana in the 1950s (Jahoda, 1958a, 1958b) and Patricia Greenfield's later research in Senegal with the Wolof (Greenfield, 1966; Greenfield et al., 1966). The latter was closely linked to the work of Jerome Bruner (1915–2016), with whom the educational psychologist David Olson—who himself developed into an important voice in research on literacy—was then associated (see e.g., Olson, 1994).

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) is among the rare psychologists whose research agenda included literacy as such. On the one hand, his conceptual and empirical work on the relationship between literacy and thinking in the development of children was published posthumously in *Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky, 1987/1934, 167–267). On the other hand, he and Alexander Luria (1902–1977) planned cross-cultural and cross-historical research in Central Asia, more precisely in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, to demonstrate the main assumptions of cultural-historical psychology regarding the socio-cultural formation of mind. Although Vygotsky's poor health prevented him from participating personally in this work, Luria and a number of young assistants carried it out at the beginning of the 1930s. However, for political reasons, its full results were only published decades later (on the complicated role of Luria as a cultural psychologist within his life-writing, see Kölbl & Métraux, 2025). The renowned Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka (1886–1941) was also part of this team, although he only participated in one rather short expedition. Although Luria and Vygotsky also wanted to include anthropologists, these efforts failed. Their empirical analyses argued that key issues in thinking, imagination, perception, and other psychic functions, far from following universal laws, were narrowly tied to sociocultural contexts—including the presence or absence of formal schooling and literacy (Luria, 1976). These studies retain great interest, despite their simplistic view of Islam, uncritical position towards collectivization and Soviet literacy campaigns, and postulation of a rather linear teleological collective and individual development from an illiterate to a literate person and from an illiterate towards a literate society (see also Proctor, 2020, 71–116). It is certainly no accident that the issue of literacy and illiteracy became a relatively prominent research subject in psychology in post-revolutionary and post-war Russia/early Soviet Union (as opposed to Switzerland or Germany), given the massive literacy campaigns in large parts of the new Soviet republics and the omnipresent *besprizornye* (children without guardians) roaming the streets who had little or no formal school education at all (Mecacci, 2019). Drawing on Sheila Fitzpatrick's (1979) work on education in the Soviet Union between 1921 and 1934, Lyons emphasizes that "in the terminology of literacy drives, there is often a very fine line between eliminating illiteracy and eliminating illiterate people" (Lyons, 2022, 34).[1]

Luria's work was an important inspiration for cross-cultural and cultural psychology in general and research on literacy in the Global South in particular. Michael Cole's work with the Kpelle in Liberia, for example, is closely related to Luria's early research in Central Asia: it tried to disentangle the effects of formal schooling from those of literacy on cognitive development (which Luria never did) by comparing groups with various levels of formal schooling and literacy skills. The telling—and apt—subtitle of this seminal monograph is "*An Exploration in Experimental Anthropology*" (Cole et al., 1971).[2] Hence, Cole et al. and Luria's work was already unconfined by rigid disciplinary boundaries.

A further step concerning transdisciplinarity was undertaken in the (New) Literacy Studies, which also constituted an important specific turn towards empirical research on literacy. The work in anthropology and psychology reviewed above aimed mainly at formulating grand theories, but from the 1980s, this new approach focused on concrete daily practices and the formulation of middle-range theories. Brian Street, who played a critical role in this endeavor (Street, 1984), criticized what he called the "autonomous model" of literacy that positioned literacy "as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character" (Street, 1993, 5). He contrasted this with the "ideological model," which positioned "literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society and recognize[d] the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts" (Street, 1993, 7). This empirically informed critique opened the way for a larger strand of literature that was not realized by anthropologists or linguists alone, but often through transdisciplinary approaches based on empirical research that situated and solidified the concept of literacy in actual everyday practice (Collins, 1995; Gee, 1991; Rowsell & Pahl, 2020). We position ourselves in this line of transdisciplinary research focused on concrete daily practices and middle-range theories and seek to contribute to its further development (Alber & Kölbl, 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Kölbl & Alber, 2025). The twist towards a more dynamic and processual understanding of literacy in the (New) Literacy Studies, undertaken among other things, by looking at "literacy events" (Street, 2000), needs to be enlarged, we would like to argue, by looking more intensively at the dynamics of *illiteracy*. That could be done by conceptualizing *illiteracy events* as well, or, as we demonstrate in the next section, by focusing on processes of *literacizing* and *illiteracizing*. Or, as we argue as well, by conceptualizing illiteracy and literacy as relational phenomena that mutually constitute each other.

Other recent work in what is now often labeled just as Literacy Studies—for example, on literacy as social practice and its relevance for work with deaf students—demonstrates that the field is developing in a variety of directions (Papen, 2023). Further work aims at a novel synthesis between classic universalist claims and the contextualizing purposes of Literacy Studies (Collins & Blot, 2005).

CONCEPTUALIZING ILLITERACY AND LITERACY AS MULTIPLE AND RELATIONAL PHENOMENA

Literacy and illiteracy should never be conceptualized in isolation from each other, at either a societal or an individual level. As outlined, our disciplines have long conceptualized this relatedness by locating two apparently independent antagonists on a historical or biographical timescale (from illiteracy to literacy) or geography (the West as literate, the rest as illiterate) and thus assumed that literacy might sometimes exist without illiteracy and vice versa. As outlined, this dichotomy has already been criticized and largely rejected, but the two concepts' assumed independence also needs to be challenged. We conceptualize literacy and illiteracy as intrinsically related and argue that this relationality is key to defining both since empirical research has demonstrated that neither exists without the other. It is only with the introduction of literacy that illiteracy emerges as its relational other; the concept would be useless in a space where nobody read, wrote, or knew about writing. This relationality is key to any definition of literacy or illiteracy. We thus define (il)literacy as a relational societal or personal distinction between the presence and absence of skills and knowledge related to both existing writing systems and their use (Alber & Kölbl, 2025). Part of this relationality is the not universal but often important distinction between attributing (il)literacy to oneself or to others. As notions and perceptions of (il)literacy depend on time and place, they vary in not only vernacular but also academic and policy discourses. Our definition accounts for how the distinction is so highly dependent on context that the same ability can be labeled as an indicator of literacy in one time or place and illiteracy in another.

For instance, in the Republic of Benin in West Africa, literacy is largely defined in both vernacular discourse and official documents of the state bureaucracy by the ability to read and write French, the current national and former colonial language. Some literacy programs make use of local languages, but only as a stepping stone towards learning to write French. The fact that a large fraction of the population

has studied at Qur'anic schools for years, a standard feature of Muslim children's education, is largely ignored: people who can "only" read Arabic are still seen as illiterate. However, in Arab countries, reading and writing Arabic, of course, counts as literacy.

Our definition can be expanded, or it can be narrowed to specify, for instance, "digital literacy" (Abou Moumouni & Krauß, 2023) or "health literacy" (Bello, 2014) as the capacity to understand medical treatments and health communications. These specifications are especially important because they demonstrate that reading and writing or understanding are always related to specific domains. Institutional changes to these or the introduction of new technologies may contribute to the creation of new (il)literacies. However, we oppose expanding the concept to apply to *any* kind of knowledge whatsoever and argue that a link to writing systems (albeit in a broad sense) is always crucial. Such systems may vary widely: for example, they may depend on textiles and weaving (Arnold, 2023), knots and cords (Salomon, 2013), pictures (Gaillemin, 2022), signs written in sand, or digital devices. In any case, however, they must be shared within a community or society.

And finally, our understanding of (il)literacy is shaped by a processual perspective: it is not static but constantly remade and changed, not only over individual life courses but also through societal actions. For instance, some of our research partners in Benin and Bolivia learned to read and write a little during their short school careers and later lost these abilities simply through lack of practice. Others, such as some in Benin, did not attend school but learned to understand and speak French by watching television and later to read through self-study or by practicing on signs in the streets. Of course, such processes also happen on the societal level when states initiate schooling campaigns or make schools accessible and mandatory, resulting in an increased level of reading and writing ability among youth. Similarly, if schools are closed or girls are excluded, the opposite might also happen.

Taking this processuality seriously at the individual as well as on the societal level, we suggest complementing the concepts of literacy and illiteracy with the concepts of *literacizing* and *illiteracizing*. We define these as processes of learning and unlearning reading and writing skills and assume that they happen in any phase of the life course. For example, someone may have learned to read and write in school but then lost these skills due to living conditions and biographical situations that offered no opportunity—or even need—to practice them. Later, they might need to review or relearn what they once knew to cope with changing environments or life situations. Besides defining (il)literacizing as processes to learn and unlearn reading and writing skills, we assume that it can happen in any language or script that is seen as relevant in a society. Furthermore, processes of literacizing and illiteracizing both take place in complex and intermingled ways, both diachronically over the course of someone's life and synchronically as they move between different social settings. The process of (il)literacizing is neither limited to the acts of completely autonomous subjects nor one in which persons are merely subjected to all-powerful external forces. Instead, it happens in a continuum of self(il)literacizing and hetero(il)literacizing, sometimes on a discursive level (for arguments in favor of a "literacy continuum," see also Lyons, 2022, 99–108).

Like literacy and illiteracy, processes of illiteracizing are relational. We regard all forms of illiteracizing in a given society as related to its standards of literacy and processes of literacizing. For example, the global standards of literacy explicitly referred to in the UN Millennium Goal of "education for all" and promoted by UNESCO policies (UNESCO, 2010) lead to processes of literacizing while simultaneously also creating what they seek to eradicate: in setting a new standard of literacy, they also label those who do not meet it as illiterate and thus illiteracize them.

As suggested above, the (New) Literacy Studies starting in the 1980s (Street, 1984, 1993; Bartlett et al., 2011; Rowsell & Pahl, 2020) helped to overcome notions of literacy and illiteracy as static entities by conceptualizing literacy as "literacy events" that take place within complex webs of societal and social practices (Heath, 1982; Street, 2000). Looking back at this work and taking up the idea of "literacy events" (or maybe, emphasizing the dynamic and processual dimension, in our terminology, "literacizing events"), we suggest, as mentioned, also paying attention to "illiteracy events" (or "illiteracizing events") to understand the societal and personal processes through which subjects are rendered illiterate in specific settings (Alber & Kölbl, 2023b).[3] Here, one might think of persons who are confronted with recently changed and unfamiliar bureaucratic arrangements (perhaps due to shifts in technology; see Abou Moumouni &

Krauß, 2023) or workers required to sign employment contracts that they are unable to read. These examples show that processes of illiteracizing can happen not only in societies with low literacy but in any place described or perceived as literate.

LITERACIZING AND ILLITERACIZING IN URBAN LITERATE ENVIRONMENTS

Our conceptual focus on entangled and coeval processes of literacizing and illiteracizing is based not only on theoretical reflections but also grounded in empirical work. Following how local actors cope with literate environments in globalized situations of illiteracy in urban contexts in Benin and Bolivia allowed us to better understand the life worlds of our research partners and their everyday struggles with these literate environments and how they constantly live through processes of literacizing and illiteracizing. In the following, we present our empirical approach, followed by some selected findings on practices and discourses of (il)literacizing.

We chose two urban sites, Parakou in Northern Benin and the La Paz-El Alto metropolitan area in Bolivia, with the aim to disentangle the widespread association of illiteracy and the countryside that characterizes many literacy programs, including those in Benin and Bolivia. At the same time, our decision to accompany research partners older than 25 years allowed us to overcome another shortcoming of these programs, the idea that illiteracy can be eradicated by working with youth. In fact, we acknowledge that processes of literacizing do not end with the end of schooling or formal education, just as those of illiteracizing can also be observed at any moment in the life course.

Both countries share some features with regard to (il)literacy, which helped us to discuss and sometimes compare (see below) the findings. In both Benin and Bolivia, literacy is mainly associated with skills in a dominant national language introduced under colonialism (Spanish and French, respectively), even though much of the population are native speakers of indigenous languages (Aymara or occasionally Quechua in El Alto and La Paz and Baatonum, Dendi, or Fulfulde in Parakou). Both sites are also characterized by strong rural ties based on migration and other mobility patterns, and both countries are among the less literacized of their continents, despite official statistics sometimes suggesting otherwise, as is the case in Bolivia. However, despite these similarities, we did not aim to produce systematic anthropological comparison or systematic cross-cultural psychology (Matsumoto & van de Vijver, 2010) or to make hierarchical comparisons between the sites. Our research methodology foresees analyzing a specific phenomenon, namely, that of coping with illiteracy, based on two field studies. In doing so, we take the specific practices of each research site very seriously and are able to do some "fluid comparisons" (Schnegg & Lowe, 2020). At the same time, conducting research at two sites in the Global South has allowed us to take each urban context—hermeneutically speaking—as a comparative horizon (Straub, 2006), identify commonalities and differences across different geographical spaces and cultural contexts, and generate and empirically saturate hypotheses about their emergence, persistence, and dissipation.

In both Benin and Bolivia, we followed about 20 research partners from 25 to 50 years old who have completed no more than 3 years of formal schooling. We studied how they, their kin and co-workers, state actors, literacy mediators (Kölbl & Alber, 2025), and others cope with various forms of (il)literacy in the workplace. Following how these shape social relationships and interactions with (state) bureaucracies, as well as how these appeared in everyday situations, we could detect that although literacy and illiteracy were crucial for these interactions, especially illiteracy was often made invisible, not only by the actors themselves but also by state institutions and the social environment. We were accompanying our research partners through their respective familial, occupational, and other relevant social contexts over the course of approximately three years using informal conversations, interviews, and participant observation, including biographical interviews as well as conversations with the social environment of our research partners. We also understood participant observation as "thick participation" (Spittler, 2014). This allowed for a twofold diachronic perspective, including both retrospective biographical reconstructions and a forward-looking longitudinal approach. In both, the temporal dimension of coping with situations of illiteracy in

a world shaped by literacy was omnipresent. This also included various forms of learning, unlearning, and forgetting while facing, circumventing, and avoiding situations of illiteracy in both institutional and non-institutional contexts and on both more individual and more societal levels.

This methodological approach, which could be summed up in George Marcus's (1995, 106) maxim of "follow the people," led us to make visits to the villages where our research partners were born or from which they migrated to the city. We combined this with a second methodological approach: participant observation, interviews, and ethnographic studies in selected field sites that we identified as highly relevant to processes of coping with (il)literacy. These included markets, driving schools, literacy courses, workplaces like construction sites and tailors' and carpenters' shops, cemeteries, churches and mosques, hospitals, courthouses, union halls, political offices, and polling places. In thus methodologically realizing ethnographies of spaces, we observed and analyzed concrete and everyday actions in these spaces and thus how *illiteracy events* were made and reproduced there: in fact, what spaces of coping with illiteracy are. Interviews with various experts from sectors such as education, health services, and the judiciary have further enriched our empirical material.

As we developed our methodological approach on-site, inspired by Grounded Theory, we sought to identify similarities and differences. In both places, we thus included phases of collective research inspired by the ECRIS—*Enquête Collective Rapide d'Identification des conflits et des groupes Stratégiques* (Rapid Collective Inquiry for the Identification of Conflicts and Strategic Groups)—a method developed in the Republic of Benin (Bierschenk & de Sardan, 1997). This allowed us, as a multidisciplinary team, to gain deep empirical insights in both places, which helped the theoretical work afterwards.

This combination of collective fieldwork in both places, and the longer-term participant observation in form of individual fieldwork enabled us to reconstruct a great variety of practices and discourses around (il)literacy in both places, some of them very similar, others more specific to one place. These include specific mnemonic and learning strategies, interactions with various types of literacy mediators (see Alber & Kölbl, 2023b, and Papen, 2010, for this concept), face-work in the classic sense of Goffman (Goffman, 1955), and coping with emotions of shame. In the following, we want to illustrate our basic findings that processes of literacizing and illiteracizing are constantly interwoven in individual biographies as in societal constellations and in diachronic processes as well as synchronic societal fields. We thus present the biography of Jesús, a young man of Aymara descent living in El Alto, one of our research partners.[4]

Jesús, in his twenties at the time of this study, had been born in a Bolivian village near Lake Titicaca. He had started school—and thus, a process of literacizing—rather late, at the age of 10, but detested it and left 3 years later with rather rudimentary Spanish. Before entering school and after leaving it, Jesús worked with his father in the fields and helped him sell the harvest at the market. Of course, here he learned as well to express himself and to count; thus, these activities could also be described as part of processes of (il)literacizing. As a teenager, he moved to La Paz, where he lived with an aunt for a while, earning money from various low-paid jobs. During this time, he hardly ever practiced reading or writing, which can be defined as processes of illiteracizing. At the same time, being in La Paz, he was surrounded by letters—in the streets, markets, and everywhere, far more than in his home village in the Bolivian Altiplano.

Later, he began to work in El Alto, adjacent to La Paz, for a franchise of a company that sold dietary supplements and organized sport activities. His then-girlfriend played an essential role as his literacy mediator and helped him with all the aspects of his job that involved reading and writing, as well as calculations. He also received support from his employer, which provided him with audio and print materials that helped him with his reading and writing abilities, although this was supposedly directed mainly at improving his motivation and self-esteem. This period in his life was broadly characterized by processes of literacizing. However, his girlfriend left him due to a dispute about her pregnancy, and he not only lost his life partner but also the key person who enabled him to work with letters and numbers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he was laid off and left El Alto to return to his village. It is quite possible that this new phase of his life will feature new processes of illiteracizing.

In Jesús' life, alternating phases of literacizing and illiteracizing have been introduced by both personal decisions, such as leaving school, and societal conditions, like the pandemic—and very often by a combination of the two. And even though they broadly alternated, at any time in his life elements of both

could be detected, as when he was more than ever surrounded by writing in La Paz, even though after leaving school he was going through processes of illiteracizing. Looking at several similar biographical accounts, we see that they, too, often reflect a broader history of events like new political regimes (and corresponding changes in the national politics of education[5]), new opportunities, changing labor conditions, the presence of new media, or the pandemic. Such societal changes with far-reaching consequences for processes of (il)literacizing are not restricted to the present. Processes of colonization in our two research countries contributed to specific forms of literacizing their indigenous populations through the introduction of the Latin alphabet and Spanish and French languages (for the Andean region, see e.g., Rappoport & Cummins, 2011). Colonialism thus also contributed to illiteracizing the colonized people. In the Andean case, for example, the introduction of letters contributed to marginalizing textile-weaving as a specific writing system (Arnold, 2023); for the (also pre- and post-Inka) history of the cord- and knot-based medium *khipu*, see Salomon (2013). A further step was the introduction of compulsory schooling, which obviously literacized much of the populations while also illiteracizing others who did not attend school or left it after a short period. In colonial Dahomey, the later Republic of Benin, the introduction of colonial schools went hand in hand with a colonial classification and distinction between the so-called *evolués* and so-called *indigènes*, which also meant that the former were seen as legally treated by French law, the *Code Napoleon*, and the latter as legally situated in the indigenous law. In fact, not belonging to the very small minority of persons being educated and literacized in colonial schools, meant not only being illiteracized but also being excluded from privileges and benefits in the colonial order (Alber, 2023).

In contrast, before colonialism, *illiteracy* in the language of the former colonizers was previously not an issue in the large parts of each country, where virtually no one used this language, but the introduction of compulsory schooling resulted in standards that defined some as literate and others as illiterate or semi-literate. Missionary activities within and beyond colonial periods are also an important context in which complex processes of (il)literacizing took and take place. Gaillemin (2022), for example, shows how native Quechua speakers in the Potosí region (Bolivia) still represent today Christian doctrine using pictorial signs.

As mentioned, (il)literacizing could also be studied from a *synchronic perspective*. For example, Ibrahim is a man in his thirties who lives and works in Northern Benin.[6] He never attended school and never learned to read and write French in any formal educational setting but still has a successful small business repairing electronic devices, including radios, televisions, mobile phones, and computers. Nonetheless, he describes himself as—and is considered by others to be—illiterate. While he did not attend state schools (like many Muslim Beninese boys and even more girls at his time), he learned Arabic writing at a Qur'anic school. Thus, the same person who is considered literate in the mosque can be considered illiterate outside the mosque. The ascription of being literate or being illiterate varies across social spaces and social roles. Literacy and French competency are viewed as roughly equivalent in Beninese society, as can be observed in the almost exclusive focus on French throughout the educational system. Observations in our ECRIS in Parakou (see above) confirm this: when we asked several people what they would call an illiterate person in their local language (such as Baatonum, Dendi, or Fulfulde), every single interviewee told us expressions that literally meant "a person who has no ability in French."

We return to Jesús to show that processes of (il)literacizing happen not only through practice but also discourse (though of course there is no sharp distinction between the two). In sketching his biography, we mentioned that he left school rather early. Why was this? According to him, his schoolmates, but also his teacher, constantly persecuted him because he looked obviously "Indio," which they equated with a sort of innate ignorance and illiteracy. The mere fact of being perceived as Indio set processes of illiteracizing into work. Such accounts are quite common in other parts of our empirical material, too. Moreover, racism in Bolivian society has continued and—despite changes and various political efforts—can still be observed today (see, for example, Canessa, 2023; from the perspective of political Indianism, see Reinaga, 1970). Sometimes such equations of "Indianness" with ignorance and illiteracy are also camouflaged and come across as a kind of "benevolent racism." When the Aymara Víctor Hugo Cárdenas became vice-president in the 1990s, for example, Goedeking reports that members of the social elite in La Paz described Cárdenas as an "Indio culto" (cultivated Indio) (Goedeking, 2003, 218).

RESEARCH ON LITERACY AND ILLITERACY AS A MODEL FOR TRANSDISCIPLINARY WORK

Academic work in the interstices between anthropology and psychology has long existed. The above-mentioned research in Liberia by Cole et al. is but one example; others include studies of the Culture and Personality School by Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), Margaret Mead (1901–1978), Gregory Bateson (1904–1980), and others; the Harvard Department of Social Relations by Jerome Bruner (1915–2016), Clyde Kluckhohn (1905–1960), John and Beatrice Whiting (1908–1999; 1914–2003), and others; and the Saarbrücken Working Group of Ernst Boesch (1916–2014), which also included Lutz Eckensberger, Bernd Krewer, and Sigrid Paul (1929–2014). Recent efforts aim at further diversifying psychological anthropology and integrating academic landscapes where it is less prevalent (see, for example, Beatty, 2017; Funk & Stodulka, 2023).

Cooperation between our disciplines can take very different forms, depending on epistemological assumptions, methodological approaches, empirical interests, and the awareness of the history of the disciplines. Our specific cooperation in the interstices between social anthropology and cultural psychology aims at not only better understanding our own research (by reflecting it through the lens of the other discipline) but also at detecting blind spots in our disciplines due to our reflections on methodological approaches and the histories and epistemologies of both disciplines. This is especially true for (il)literacy, which we experienced in fact as a blind spot in both disciplines, albeit on different levels.

Some years ago, Bartlett et al. (2011) argued that anthropology is pivotal in research in the (New) Literacy Studies because it analyzes societal processes and "helps seeing" (Bartlett et al., 2011, 165). Therefore, they regard ethnographic methods as particularly important in research concerning digital and multilingual literacy—topics they identify as central areas for future investigations. They further argue that ethnographic methods are also essential to research on the reproduction of illiteracy. Our experience confirms the importance of ethnographic methods. In particular, the ECRIS phases in which we tested and reflected on different approaches were of utmost importance in our collaboration. Here, we also experienced that cultural psychology can offer illuminating analyses of individual or subjective processes by conceptualizing them as inextricably linked with sociocultural contexts rather than isolated elements in a societal vacuum. The same logic of highlighting different focuses without reifying them holds true for social anthropology, which emphasizes societal processes without disregarding individual actions, processes, and perceptions. Therefore, we experienced as our common ground a single but multifaceted empirical research approach developed together and shared by all project members. It was based on the two disciplines' theoretical and epistemological perspectives, which we experienced as complementary, however both speaking to our common empirical ground. It is deeply rooted in hermeneutics and helps us to refine existing and develop new qualitative methods suitable for their research on (il)literacy.

Let us turn one last time to one of the cases described above and give a hint as to what our collaboration taught us and where further analyses could lead to. When reflecting on the processes of (il)literacizing in the life of Jesús, one can also rethink concepts of learning: The processes of (il)literacizing are obviously closely linked to processes of learning and unlearning. As we have seen above, Jesús learns the basics of reading and writing in school but again unlearns these competencies at least partially after having left school and while working in a field where writing and reading are not needed or can relatively easily be circumvented. This changes again when moving to El Alto and working for the company selling dietary supplements, where writing and reading are demanded. This learning and unlearning is linked to action. Learning here is certainly nothing that just could be described via stimuli and responses, as classic behaviorist learning theories would suggest. Rather, it makes sense to regard learning in this case as action and as a quite specific form of action, namely, action directed towards literacy (see also Kölbl & Alber, 2025; Krüger, 2009, 25). Action is, in psychology, usually limited to goal-directed action. But action can also be thought of as norm- and rule-oriented action and as action within stories and history and action as story itself (Straub, 2006). In doing so, temporality and creativity in human action are highlighted. And as we hope to have shown, Jesús' learning certainly cannot be reduced to goal-oriented action. By including learning as action within history, Jesús' biography gains further contour, and we evade the trap of a

psychology, which all too often reduces itself to an individuocentric project. Social anthropology, with its high sensitivity for the historical dimension and the societal embeddedness of every action, and a wide understanding of action and agency, is a good antidote here. On the other hand, psychological perspectives have been useful in our project to get a more fine-grained understanding of individual learning processes and their cognitive dimension, including mnestic processes. Here, anthropology would have focused much more on the societal level. For the research topic of illiteracy—as should be the case for other research topics, too—is open to perspectives focusing more on society or on persons. In joint projects as ours, the complex entanglement of both should become much more visible than in "mono-disciplinary" research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

An intensive collaboration between cultural psychology and social anthropology that examined literacy and illiteracy not only contributes to the further development of the (New) Literacy Studies but may also serve as a model for increased collaboration between our disciplines.

Our empirical research, as well as the above-mentioned reflections on the histories of both disciplines, have helped us identify a shared blind spot—illiteracy—which we might have overlooked without this transdisciplinary focus. Our common discussions made us aware of similarities and differences concerning this blind spot between the two disciplines and helped us understand the often-overlooked centrality of illiteracy in the history of both, empirically as well as epistemologically. Teleologically devalued by both disciplines as merely literacy's opposite, illiteracy received even less empirical attention than literacy. Consequently, (New) Literacy Studies conceptualized literacy events and the societal production of literacy but tended to overlook the continuous production of illiteracy until today in a world that sees itself as globally literacizing. This production of (il)literacy happens simultaneously in individual life courses as in societal processes such as the building of educational systems (for a classic in the production of literacy in school, see the seminal volume of Cook-Gumperz, 1986). Talking conceptually about processes of illiteracizing acknowledges that it is deeply entangled with literacizing, that the two go hand in hand, and that literacy (and processes of literacizing) can only adequately be described by looking at its relational other, illiteracy (and processes of illiteracizing). It was only our transdisciplinary conversation and research that made us aware of these blind spots and helped us to understand the similar biases shared by our disciplines.

The productive cooperation we experienced could illuminate many other research topics as well. (Il)literacy, however, is certainly a research subject that is key to both of our disciplines. As we have argued, this is the case for concrete empirical analyses in our contemporary world, in which multiple forms of hetero- and auto-(il)literacizing can be observed that have both high societal and high subjective relevance, in multiple ways and with multiple effects. But this is also the case in historical perspective. Looking back on our disciplines' respective ways of thematizing literacy while often overlooking illiteracy, we see both phenomena, in their relationality, not only at the heart of both disciplines but also as constitutive in the formation of disciplinary similarities and boundaries in the social sciences.

In our experience, cooperation between social anthropology and cultural psychology offered richer and more multifaceted empirical and conceptual results in a specific and central field of research than we could have obtained on our own. In all modesty, this already is no small achievement. If our argument is not going in completely the wrong direction, however, we would further claim that such cooperation has the potential to bring deeper insights into the very fabric of which both our disciplines are made.

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ENDNOTES

[1] These lines can be found in a subdivision of a chapter entitled "The war on illiteracy," and it is noteworthy that the imagery, metaphors and associations applied to illiteracy very often have to do with war and fighting and elimination and eradication, as well as disease, darkness, and blindness.

[2] For a psychology of literacy also based on cultural psychological research, see Scribner and Cole (1981).

[3] In a similar vein but ultimately resulting in a different conceptual offer, the historian Martyn Lyons proposes the term "acts of illiteracy": "Whereas the proponents of the 'New Literacy Studies' talk of literacy events or literacy acts to describe an individual's engagement with a text, I wish to turn this vocabulary on its head to consider 'acts of *ill*iteracy,' that is to say acts which illustrate an incomplete level of literacy competence in one dimension or another" (Lyons, 2022, 6).

[4] We would like to thank Evelyn Apaza Huanca for gathering the data concerning Jesús.

[5] The impact of new political regimes is very present in the biographies of our research partners. On the Bolivian side, the efforts of alphabetization programs in the era of Evo Morales are mirrored in the biographical narrations. In Benin, the Marxist-Leninist phase of Mathieu Kérékou, and therewith, the first large alphabetization campaigns had a similar impact.

[6] We thank Dr. Issifou Abou Moumouni for having followed Ibrahim over a period of time and produced this case study.

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