**Memoir Assignment for Lifespan Course**

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The goal of asking students to read a memoir in a lifespan course is to provide them with “real life” examples for the content we are covering. Often the memoir is an alternative for students do not want to engage in service learning (by working in the community with children or older adults). The assignment described below is a component of an intermediate level psychology course on lifespan development. I have also taught courses exclusively using memoir (and some fiction), in a writing-intensive first year seminar.

I try to find memoirs that are not the basis for films or mini-series. The first four fit this criterion. The last two do not. Four options is a good number for a course. Limiting the options makes it easier for grading and commenting on their reflections (fewer books to keep track of).

Memoir Options

* Beah, I., (2007). *Long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier*. New York, NY: Sarah Crichton Books. (Civil war in Sierra Leone; author “drafted” as a soldier at age 12)
* Betts, R. D. (2010). *A question of freedom: A memoir of learning, surviving, and coming of age in prison*. New York, NY: Avery. (16-year-old African-American male sentenced to 9 years in prison for carjacking; graduated from Yale Law School)
* Westover, T. (2018). *Educated: A memoir.* New York, NY: Random House. (Growing up in a survivalist Mormon family without formal schooling, but ending up attending college and receiving a Ph.D. from Cambridge University. Warning: graphic descriptions of domestic violence)
* Winterson, J. (2013). *Why be happy when you can be normal?* New York, NY: Grove Press. (Adopted child living in a fundamentalist Christian family in northern England, comes out as lesbian; Warning: descriptions of child abuse and neglect)
* Walls, J. (2005). *The Glass Castle.* New York, NY: Scribner. (Growing up in poverty with mentally ill parents, primarily in West Virginia. Warning: descriptions of physical abuse, substance use, and neglect)
* Feldman, D. (2012). *Unorthodox: The scandalous rejection of my Hasidic roots.* New York: NY: Simon & Schuster. (Still reading this one, but I think it will work well!)

Sample Reflection Questions: Graded 1 (full credit), .5 (half credit), and 0 (no credit)

Expected length per question:  Two to three paragraphs and no more than one page single-spaced.

1. After the first chapter:

What is your first impression of this book and author?  Do you have questions that you hope will be answered as you read further?

1. After several chapters:

Think about which theme or theory in development (from Ch 1) might apply to this person's story.  Briefly explain the theme or theoretical perspective and describe how it might help you understand the context, age group, and/or developmental tasks you are reading about.

1. Language:

Our unit on language focused on language acquisition, but language use develops across the lifespan.  What is the role of language in your book?  Do you see examples of different uses of language as a result of the context?  Are there examples of the pragmatic use of language?

1. Peer Relations:

Describe the author's peer relations.  Given their early experiences with their parent (e.g., attachment style, and the like) are you surprised by their relations with peers? What other factors might influence peer relations (besides parent relationship)?

1. Parenting:

Consider the parenting described in your memoir.  What type of parenting did the author receive (by each parent, if applicable)?  What were the strengths and weaknesses of this parenting?  Can we "trust" a child to accurately report on the quality of parenting they received?

1. Identity:

Consider the author's sense of identity.  Describe the various ways he/she identifies?  How his/her identity evolve over the course of the book?

1. When you finish the book:

Review the sections in your textbook on resiliency and consider the resilience of your author. What features - internal and external - contributed to his/her resiliency?  Were there early signs in his/her childhood that he/she would be able to meet and survive these challenges?