

AFFILIATION, URBAN SIZE, URGENCY, AND COST OF RESPONSES TO LOST LETTERS¹

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Summary.—A study using 420 “lost letters” was designed to test the hypothesis that returned responses would be larger from small towns than from suburbs or cities unless the addressee was affiliated with a nonpolitical group. Percent returns to control, Pesticide Action Network, Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project, Network for the Enforcement of Humane Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and the KlanWatch affiliates were 60.7%, 59.5%, 56.0%, 44.0%, and 36.9%, respectively. Responses from the city were generally fewer than those from suburbs except for Pesticide or Immigration Law affiliations. Urban responses were always fewer than those from small towns. Urgency and cost did not influence returns. The lost letter technique seems suitable as a research tool for inferring public opinion toward nonpolitical, emotionally subtle social issues.

Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) developed a research method for measuring community attitudes toward political organizations, including deviant ones such as Friends of the Communist and Nazi Parties. These researchers placed a large number of stamped envelopes, addressed to fictitious persons and political organizations, in areas frequented by the general public. The envelopes were positioned address-side-up so to letter finders they would appear to have been lost. The letter finders had a choice of mailing, destroying, ignoring, or keeping the lost letters. The researchers assumed, that were a lost letter retrieved, the finder would examine the address and note it had not been mailed (Milgram, *et al.*, 1965). Then the letter finder might decide whether to return the letter. Presumably a finder’s attitude toward a particular person or group might affect this decision. By changing the name of the organization in the address of the lost letter, varied return rates for each political organization were noted (Milgram, *et al.*, 1965).

Additional research is needed to help establish Milgram’s lost letter technique as a research tool for sampling public opinion to establish precise limitations and applicability. Several studies have shown the lost letter technique indicated accurately community attitudes toward various organizations, political parties, and candidates (Milgram, *et al.*, 1965; Milgram, 1969; Shotland, Berger, & Forsythe, 1970). Other researchers have inferred public opinion about such emotionally charged social issues as homosexuality, busing,

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and abortion (Bolton, 1974; Kunz & Fernquist, 1989; Whitehead & Metzger, 1981). In sum, the names and addresses of political organizations and controversial social issues have evoked polarizing emotional responses among letter finders and were associated with differential mail return rates. Interestingly, Milgram (1969) stated that the lost letter technique "is not very suitable for gauging opinion on subtle issues or for assessing preferences when these are fairly evenly distributed in the population" (p. 264).

In 1994, pollsters collected US public opinion data indicating a "fairly normal distribution of responses" toward the danger which farming pesticides pose for both the environment and families (Davis & Smith, 1994). Similarly, fairly evenly distributed responses were noted in US opinion polls with regard to issues of admittance of refugees (Anon., 1995), tougher laws to limit immigration (Hugick, 1992a), elimination of all forms of public assistance to legal and illegal immigrants (Schneider, Holland, & Norman, 1994), and the presence of a racist conspiracy (Hugick, 1992b).

We have attempted to expand the limits and applicability of the lost letter technique as a tool for inferring public sentiment about more emotionally subtle, nonpolitical social issues. Therefore, we chose social issues on which public opinion appeared to be more "evenly distributed" to assess first whether the use of nonpolitical addressees' affiliations, representing less emotionally charged social issues, affected return of responses. Secondly, we sought to examine whether the conditions (urban size, urgency, and cost) in which letters were placed influenced return of lost letters.

METHOD

The present experiment modified the designs of Hansson and Slade (1977), Hedge and Yousif (1992), and Rushton (1978) by adding both new affiliations for addressees and other conditions such as urban size, urgency, and cost. In addition to the control addressee D. G. Jones, the new addressees' affiliations were Pesticide Action Network of Florida, Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project, Florida Network for the Enforcement of Humane Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and KlanWatch of Florida. These addressees' affiliations were chosen because they represent social issues that have elicited a fairly normal distribution of responses when the public was polled (Anon., 1995; Davis & Smith, 1994; Hugick, 1992a, 1992b; Schneider, Holland, & Norman, 1994).

The stamped, sealed, and self-addressed envelopes were distributed in equal numbers inside or near post offices or mailboxes (low cost condition) or were placed away from post offices or mailboxes (high cost condition) in the county's cities, suburban areas, and smaller towns. None of the envelopes bore return addresses. Half the letters had an urgent label clearly positioned on the top left-hand corner of the envelope (urgent condition); the

rest had no such label (nonurgent condition). In addition, dropping letters in the cities, suburbs, and small towns were matched for day of the week, time of day (morning vs afternoon), and general weather conditions, with equal numbers of city, suburb, and town letters dropped on any given day. A note enclosed in each envelope was coded to reflect whether it had been dropped in city, suburb, and small town near or away from post offices and mailboxes.

A total of 420 letters were dropped in Palm Beach County, Florida; 140 east of the Florida Turnpike in 31 cities near the coastline (M population = 21,871), 140 in 10 suburban areas west of the Florida Turnpike and east of the Everglades and sugar cane agricultural areas of the county (M population = 14,945) and 140 in five smaller towns around the edge of Lake Okeechobee (M population = 7,213).

RESULTS

Of 420 letters distributed, 216 (51.4%) were mailed by the finder (the altruistic response). The affiliation of the addressee was associated with different rates of letters returned. The percentages of letters returned for addressee affiliates D. G. Jones, Pesticide Action Network of Florida, Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project, Florida Network for the Enforcement of Humane Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and KlanWatch of Florida were 60.7%, 59.5%, 56.0%, 44.0%, and 36.9%, respectively [$\chi_4^2(N=420) = 14.71, p < .005$].

Urban size and addressees' affiliation also affected return of letters. From cities, returned letters were generally less frequent than from suburbs except for those returns for Pesticide Action Network of Florida or Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project affiliates [$\chi_4^2(N=420) = 34.49, p < .001$]. Returned letters from cities were always fewer than those from small towns. The rates of returned letters for each of the addressees' affiliations are found in Table 1.

Unexpectedly, there was less variation across addressees' affiliations in the number of letters returned from small towns than from cities and sub-

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF LOCATION AND ADDRESSEES' AFFILIATION

Condition (Addressee)	City		Suburb		Town		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Control	11	39.3	14	50.0	26	92.9	51	60.7
Pesticide	18	64.3	9	32.1	23	82.1	50	59.5
Immigration Law	18	64.3	9	32.1	20	71.4	47	56.0
Refugee Rights	2	7.1	12	42.9	23	82.1	37	44.0
KlanWatch	4	14.3	5	17.9	22	78.6	31	36.9
Total	53	37.9	49	35.0	114	81.4	216	51.4

urbs. It was expected that as size of the urban areas' population decreased, there would be incremental changes in the number of letters returned; however, the number of returned letters from cities was actually slightly higher than that from suburban areas. Urban and suburban areas returned only nine letters addressed to the KlanWatch of Florida affiliation, 11 letters fewer than from small towns. Interestingly, only two letters addressed to the Florida Network for the Enforcement of Humane Immigrant and Refugee Rights affiliate were returned from urban areas; however, twice as many letters addressed to the Pesticide Action Network of Florida and Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project affiliations were returned from the cities as from the suburbs. Small towns returned a total of 114 letters to all five addressees' affiliations compared to only 53 and 49 returns from cities and suburbs, respectively. Of 216 returned letters, 113 were marked urgent and 103 letters were unmarked [$\chi_2^2(N=420) = .03, p > .05$]. Similarly, 111 letters were returned in the low-cost condition, whereas 105 letters were returned in the high-cost condition [$\chi_2^2(N=420) = 5.56, p > .05$].

DISCUSSION

A negative attribution often overgeneralized to city dwellers is that they are less responsive to those in need than are small town residents. In this study, the size of the community affected rates of returned letters. In other studies, researchers (Hansson & Slade, 1977; Whitehead & Metzger, 1981) reported that community size had no effect on over-all rates of returned letters when different addressees' affiliations were utilized. Our findings that more mail was returned from towns than cities is consistent with Korte and Kerr (1975) for lost postcards and others (Bridges & Coady, 1996; Hedge & Yousif, 1992) using lost letters. Forbes and Gromoll (1971) reported identical rates of response to letters in both large cities and medium suburbs, and this is consistent with our data for the same-size communities. Conversely, Rushton (1978) found the responsiveness from the suburbs at a midway point between that shown by cities and small towns. In all, our findings are consistent with the hypothesis proposed by Milgram (1970) that returned lost letters should occur more frequently from small towns than cities.

In our study, returned letters from the cities and suburbs rather than small towns seemed to be more strongly affected by the nonpolitical addressees' affiliations. These findings do not support Milgram's hypothesis (1970) that urban residents have adapted to increased cognitive and environmental demands by becoming more socially aloof, less interpersonally responsive, and less affected by a stranger needing minor assistance. That cities were less, not more, responsive to the nonpolitically affiliated addressees compared to smaller towns seems to be in agreement with some (Bridges & Coady, 1996) but in contradiction to others (Hansson & Slade, 1977; Whitehead

& Metzger, 1981), using different manipulations of deviancy-nondeviancy. The latter two groups of researchers reported in cities more letters were returned to politically and socially deviant addressees, respectively, than for returns from small towns.

Our data support the notion that small town residents, more than urban or suburban dwellers, were equally responsive in returning letters to all of the nonpolitical affiliations. According to the literature, differences in background experiences do not seem to help explain observed responsiveness to lost letters, even though a secular outlook has been said to promote a person's prosocial responsiveness toward a stranger (London, 1970). Becker's (1957) sacred-secular typology described the sacred-oriented person on the continuum as "a kind of rural and small town American version of nineteenth century Protestant Christianity" (p. 146), who stresses ingroup loyalties (family-friend bonds) and is reluctant to support change. In contrast, he described the secular person as one who endorses values emphasizing viable change and maintains an allegiance to principles, while being free of prejudice.

Milgram (1970) noted that more situations occur in cities that may inhibit helping, and this might explain the effect of urban size on returns of lost letters. Situations perceived both as urgent and less costly are more likely to receive offers of help (Morgan, 1978). Urgency and cost did not seem to significantly influence letter returns in our study. This contrasts with the findings of Hedge and Yousif (1992) who reported significantly higher returns for letters labeled urgent and those returned in the low cost condition.

The present findings appear to show that an increase in urban size does seem to be generally associated with an over-all decrease in responsiveness to lost letters even when less emotionally polarizing and nonpolitical affiliations are utilized as addressees. Therefore, the lost letter technique seems to be suitable as a research tool for inferring public opinion toward nonpolitical and less emotion-evoking social variables. Finally, the data suggest that further studies are needed for comparisons of responses to lost letters in urban, suburban, and small town settings, especially using new social issues known to elicit nearly normal distributions of public sentiment.

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