

## AFFILIATION, COMMUNITY SIZE, AND PERSON-POSITIVITY EFFECT IN RETURN OF LOST LETTERS<sup>1</sup>

F. STEPHEN BRIDGES, STUART RYAN, AND JENNIFER J. SCHEIBE

*Division of Health, Leisure, and Exercise Science  
University of West Florida*

*Summary.*—A study using 1,008 “lost letters” was designed to test the hypotheses that returned responses would be greater in smaller rural communities than from cities, that addressees’ affiliation with a group opposed to physical education in schools would reduce the return rate, and that a person-positivity effect would influence return rates. Community Size and Person-Positivity conditions were not significantly associated with different rates of return even though returned letters from the smaller rural communities were more frequent than those from the cities across addressee conditions. Findings seem to suggest no community bias in the willingness of people to help a stranger in need by returning a lost letter. Person-Positivity conditions did not seem to improve the technique. Both addressees’ affiliations alone and community size and addressees’ affiliations were associated with significantly different rates of return in smaller rural communities, with rates of return greater in the smaller rural communities than in the cities (except for the addressee opposed to physical education in schools).

Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) experimented with a lost letter technique to assess community attitudes toward political groups and other institutions. They took stamped letters and addressed them to fictitious persons, some that were considered to differ on conventional social norms, and then distributed a large number of them in various public places where they were likely to be found by passersby. It was assumed that a passerby would either ignore the letter, respond to it but not retrieve it, or retrieve the letter and take it with them. Presumably, a letter finder’s attitude toward a particular addressee (person, political group, or other institution) might affect their decision about whether to return a lost letter in the mail. Thus, the dependent variable was based on subjects’ willingness to pick up and return in the mail these “lost letters.” Milgram, *et al.* (1965) noted that by changing the names of the addressees of the lost letters, the rates of return varied, e.g., by political group and institution. Finally, Milgram (1970) hypothesized that in cities people help others less often than those in small towns.

Most youth have a physical education class at some point in their school experience; however, few have received daily physical education classes (Mor-

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<sup>1</sup>Please send enquiries to Dr. F. Stephen Bridges, Division of Health, Leisure, and Exercise Science, The University of West Florida, 11000 University Parkway, Pensacola, FL 32514-5750 or e-mail (fbridges@uwf.edu).

row, Jackson, & Payne, 1999). Since 1991, the overall enrollment in daily physical education classes has been declining among high school students. In 1996, only 27.4% attended physical education classes daily (Surgeon General's Report, USDHHS, 1996; Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1998). The attitudes of parents toward physical education in the schools may influence children's attraction to and participation in physical activity (Brustad, 1993).

Many field studies, both in the United States and overseas countries, have compared the rates of helping in large cities and small towns. These studies used a variety of helping measures, including some which used the return of "lost" letters. In addition to these, more recent studies of "lost" letters have indicated some truth to the common stereotype that urban residents are *less* responsive to strangers in need of help, i.e., returning *relatively fewer* lost letters, than are rural or suburban ones (Bridges & Coady, 1996a, 1996b; Bridges, Welsh, Graves, & Sonn, 1997; Bridges, Williamson, & Scheibe, 1998). On the other hand, some studies of lost letters reported that urban residents are *more* responsive to those in need of help, e.g., returning *relatively more* lost letters, than are rural residents (Bridges, 1996; Bridges, Ryan, & Scheibe, 1998; Forbes & Gromoll, 1971). Unlike previous studies of lost letters, however, recent studies tested Milgram's hypothesis of rural-urban differences (1970) by evaluating statistically returns from the different sizes of community. They found that urban communities had *higher* rates of helping, e.g., returned *significantly* more lost letters, than did less populated beach and rural communities (Bridges & Rodriguez, 2000; Bridges, Thompson, & Willers, 2000, respectively).

"Person-positivity bias" is the general tendency to evaluate any individual social objects, not just self, more positively than groups or collections of individuals (aggregates) (Sears, 1983). It is based on Sears' (1983) three assumptions about the uniqueness of persons as objects evoking attitudes, e.g., animate objects such as people ranging to inanimate ones like rocks or a desert, and why they attract relatively more positive responses from other persons. First, all objects evoking attitudes could be conceptualized as representing different points on a "personhood" dimension with specific individuals at one end, collections of individuals (aggregates) in the middle, and group stereotypes somewhere between aggregates and inanimate objects at the other (impersonal) end. In fact, even animals and other beings can vary a lot on this "personhood" dimension, i.e., machines and animal characters in children's stories were evaluated more positively when given human names than when identified in the usual nonhuman manner. Thus, the characterization of the dimension as "personhood" stresses the concept of similarity between any given object and a human person (Sears, 1983). Secondly, Sears (1983) assumed that the more an object resembles a person, the more evaluators will perceive its similarity to themselves, and the more favorably it

would be evaluated. But he noted that even groups or aggregates can vary a lot on the "personhood" dimension, for example, group objects that bring to mind ordinary persons to whom an evaluator might feel more similar would be evaluated more positively than group objects that characterize an abstract type. Kaplan (1976) had noted the universal existence of a preference for a positivity bias for "people in general," but he also noted marked individual differences. Sears' (1983) third assumption is that generalized attitudes toward different objects on the "personhood" dimension tend to be compartmentalized, even when they seemed to be closely related to each other. In sum, the general tendency to evaluate persons more positively than groups reflects that similarity enhances liking (Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Byrne, 1971). Sears (1983) and his colleagues (Sears, Brown, & Ditto, 1982; Sears & Whitney, 1973) used this well-documented relationship between similarity and liking to explain why evaluations of social groups, e.g., politicians in general, are often less positive than evaluations of specific individual members of those groups, e.g., specifically named U.S. Senators.

Some researchers (Milgram, *et al.*, 1965; Simmons & Zumpf, 1983; Wicker, 1969) have reported a higher rate of return for personal letters than for those letters addressed to political groups and other institutions. In addition, higher rates of return were reported for lost letters addressed to (1) a person than those letters addressed to a person(s) "in care of" a group(s) (Bridges & Coady, 1996b; Bridges, Ryan, & Scheibe, 1998; Bridges, Williamson, & Scheibe, 1998; Hansson & Slade, 1977; Whitehead & Metzger, 1981), (2) to a person than to a group's name followed underneath by "Attention to: person's name" (Weiner, 1975), (3) to a person than those letters addressed to a person "in care of" a political group. These in turn had a higher rate of return than those letters addressed to political groups (Jacoby & Aranoff, 1971). Simmons and Zumpf (1983) offered Sears' hypotheses as a reasonable explanation for their higher return rate across conditions (kinds of addressees) for lost letters addressed to individual persons rather than to groups, e.g., committees, and for their high overall rates of return of letters.

Sears (1983) explained that the reason why machines and animal characters with human names were evaluated more positively was because the application of names changed their positions on the "personhood" dimension. We applied this concept by adding a person's name to addresses for lost letter return, so as to influence the position of the groups' stereotypes on the "personhood" dimension, thereby allowing them to be evaluated more favorably. Drawing from the work of Sears (1983) and Jacoby and Aranoff (1971) the present study sought to use a person-positivity effect, i.e., more letters are returned when they are addressed to a 'person in care of a group' than to just a 'group', to improve upon the lost letter technique as a method for assessing community responses about a somewhat political issue. We

predict, after our consideration of Kaplan's work and his modification of Sears' similarity hypothesis, that any person-positivity effect should produce both a *higher return rate* across kinds of addressees for lost letters addressed to a 'person in care of a group' than to a 'group' alone and a *higher overall rate of return of letters*.

#### METHOD

The person-positivity condition referred to whether a lost letter was addressed to a 'person in care of a group' or just a 'group'. The affiliations of addressees were renamed PTA of Santa Rosa County (Control), Committee to Support Daily Physical Education in the Schools, and Committee to Oppose Daily Physical Education in the Schools. These three fictitious political organizations had different or conflicting goals.

#### *Procedure*

A total of 1,008 lost letters, i.e., 84 letters for each of three affiliations for addressees in two sizes of community and for two conditions that manipulated person-positivity, were distributed in Santa Rosa County, Florida: 504 within the city limits of Milton and Pace (population  $M=24,955$ ) and 504 in each of 10 smaller rural communities (population  $M=2,974$ ) in Santa Rosa County (population = 115,186). Letters were distributed in incorporated and unincorporated areas of the smaller rural communities, for example, in and south of the town of Jay, Florida. Stamped envelopes were distributed in a variety of public places such as at automated teller machines, on sidewalks of busy streets, and around phone booths. A coded note was enclosed in each envelope to indicate the location of the letter drop. All envelopes were addressed to a Post Office Box in the city of Milton in Santa Rosa County, Florida. Half of the envelopes were addressed to S. Ryan in care of (the) PTA of Santa Rosa County, S. Ryan in care of (the) Committee to Support Daily Physical Education in the Schools, and S. Ryan in care of (the) Committee to Oppose Daily Physical Education in the Schools; the rest of the envelopes simply addressed to the groups. "S. Ryan" was used as the name portion of the 'person in care of a group' condition and the PTA of Santa Rosa County, Committee to Support Daily Physical Education in the Schools, and Committee to Oppose Daily Physical Education in the Schools affiliates were used as the "groups" in both types of addresses. Letters commenced with "Dear Stu."

#### RESULTS

Of 1,008 letters distributed, 344 (34.1%) were returned in the mail (considered an altruistic response). Community size was not associated with significantly different overall rates of return of letters; even though there were somewhat more returned letters from the smaller rural communities

than from the cities across addressees' conditions [ $\chi^2(N=1,008)=2.76$ , ns, power=.40, effect size=.05]. Similarly, when the control was excluded, cities and smaller rural communities returned almost the same number of letters, i.e., 107 and 105 letters, respectively, across addressees' conditions [ $\chi^2(N=672)=.007$ , ns, power=.05, effect size=.003]. The rates in each of the conditions are depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF AFFILIATION  
OF ADDRESSEE, LOCATION, AND OBJECT EVOKING ATTITUDE

		Condition			Total
		PTA (Control)	Physical Education		
			Support	Oppose	
City					
Individual Name	<i>n</i>	27	36	26	89
Group Name	<i>n</i>	25	27	18	70
Both Names	<i>n</i>	52	63	44	159
	%	31.0	37.5	26.2	31.5
Town					
Individual Name	<i>n</i>	37	42	18	97
Group Name	<i>n</i>	43	31	14	88
Both Names	<i>n</i>	80	73	32	185
	%	47.6	43.5	19.0	36.7
Total					
Individual Name	<i>n</i>	64	78	44	186
Group Name	<i>n</i>	67	58	32	158
Both Names	<i>n</i>	132	136	76	344
	%	39.3	40.5	22.6	34.1

The affiliations of addressees were significantly associated with the rates of return of the letters [ $\chi^2(N=1,008)=29.80$ ,  $p < .001$ , power=1.0, effect size=.17]. In addition, community size and addressees' affiliations were associated with significantly different rates of return in smaller rural communities, with rates of return greater in the smaller rural communities [ $\chi^2(N=504)=34.45$ ,  $p < .001$ , power=1.0, effect size=.25] than in the cities (except for those returns addressed to the Committee to Oppose Daily Physical Education in the Schools) [ $\chi^2(N=504)=5.02$ , ns, power=.50, effect size=.10].

The manipulating of the person-positivity condition was not significantly associated with different rates of return [ $\chi^2(N=1,008)=3.22$ , ns, power=.46, effect size=.06]. However, when the control addressees' affiliation was excluded, there was a significantly larger percentage of lost letters associated with returns addressed to 'person in care of a group', i.e., S. Ryan in care of a group, than those addressed to 'group(s)', i.e., Committee to Support Daily Physical Education in the Schools and Committee to Oppose Daily

Physical Education in the Schools [ $\chi^2(N=672)=6.62$ ,  $p<.02$ , power = .78, effect size = .10].

Trying to come up with a suitable control condition, i.e., PTA of Santa Rosa County, after selecting two fictitious political organizations with different or conflicting goals, i.e., Committee to *Support* Daily Physical Education in the Schools and Committee to *Oppose* Daily Physical Education in the Schools, was a difficult task. Therefore, the community size and person-positivity analyses were followed with simple comparisons (without the control address condition) because we could not be sure that public attitudes were not evoked through the use of the control, say, for example, in parents angry with their local Parent-Teacher Associations.

#### DISCUSSION

It was expected that as the size of the communities' populations decreased, there would be a significant increase in rates of returned letters; however, although the rates of return from the smaller rural communities was higher than that of the cities, the difference was not statistically significant. The present findings are not consistent with Bridges, *et al.* (2000) using the same cities and smaller rural communities in Santa Rosa County nor with Bridges and Rodriguez (2000) using a beach community in an adjacent county instead of our similar-size smaller rural communities. The present finding does not agree with Milgram's (1970) hypothesis that residents of small towns (like smaller rural communities) help others more often than those in the cities although there was a trend in that direction.

Amato (1983) reported population size to be the strongest and most consistent predictor of helping rates. Interestingly, nearly half of his 55 sample communities were located on the eastern Australian coastline. In a more general sense, our data did not support the notion that helping increases as community size decreases. As such, they are not in agreement with one of Amato's measures of helping behavior, i.e., "dropped-envelopes episode," which indicated that persons in communities with high levels of "tourism" (like those in Santa Rosa County) were slightly more likely to give assistance or be helpful. The "dropped-envelopes episode" was the only measure of helping behavior (one of four used by Amato) for which helping rates increased as community size increased. The present findings seem to suggest no community bias in the willingness of people to help by returning lost letters regardless of the address.

Unexpectedly, across kinds of addressees, some affiliations had significantly higher return rates than others. The present findings are inconsistent with other studies using very similar addressees' affiliations such as the Committee to Keep/Remove Physical Education in/from Santa Rosa Public Schools (Bridges & Clark, 2000). According to Sears' (1983) second hypoth-

esis and other previous studies, lesser "perceived similarity" to the Committee to Oppose Daily Physical Education in the Schools affiliate than the other two affiliates may help explain some of the observed lack of responsiveness to lost letters (Byrne, 1971; Sears, *et al.*, 1982; Sole, Marton, & Hornstein, 1975).

The person-positivity condition was not significantly associated with returned responses for the three addressees' affiliations. These findings are not consistent with Simmons and Zumpf (1983), as our letter return rates were not significantly higher across all three conditions for letters addressed to "person in care of a group," i.e., S. Ryan in care of a group, rather than to the "group(s)." Perhaps one reason for these findings is because our person-positivity conditions did not vary enough on the "personhood" dimension to produce any measurable positivity bonus in the form of more returned letters for one condition more than the other. Another reason might be that because our person-positivity conditions both brought to mind a collection of ordinary persons, neither of whom evaluators, e.g., letter finders, felt any more or less similar to, thereby resulting in evaluations, i.e., returned responses, being no more positive for one condition than the other.

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