

AFFILIATION, COMMUNITY SIZE, AND DESTINATION IN RETURN OF LOST LETTERS¹

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Summary.—Two field studies used 2400 “lost letters” to test the hypothesis that return rates would be greater from smaller rural communities (population $M_s=1729$) than from a city (population $M=60,591$), unless the addressee was affiliated with a socially or politically deviant group. Addressees’ affiliations were significantly associated with different rates of return in both studies. In Study A, community size and addressees’ affiliations were significantly associated with different rates of return in the city and smaller rural communities, rates generally being greater in the city even when the people in need of help were affiliated with the deviant “For Prostitution, or Female and Male Sex Workers.” Destinations were not associated with return rates in either study. In Study B, community size and addressees’ affiliation were significantly associated with different rates of return in only smaller rural communities. Return rates were lower than those from the city except when the person was affiliated with the deviant “NORML or Legalized Prostitution” addressees.

Milgram’s (1970) research in social psychology helped to organize our thoughts about urban psychology. Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) developed the lost letter technique to measure helping behavior. These investigators dispersed a large number of stamped and addressed letters in various public locations where they could be found by people passing by. The dependent variable was subjects’ willingness to pick up and mail these “lost letters.” Milgram (1970) hypothesized that in cities people help others less often than those in small towns. Other researchers tested this hypothesis and addressed letters to fictitious persons who differed in evident conformity to conventional social norms (Hansson & Slade, 1977; Whitehead & Metzger, 1981). Neither study showed a difference in the urban rate of return of lost letters regardless of whether the addressee was deviant, whereas from small towns fewer lost letters were returned if the addressee was deviant. In contrast, two recent studies (Bridges & Coady, 1996a; Bridges Welsh, Graves, & Sonn, 1997) indicated a difference in the urban rate of returned lost letters depending upon whether the addressee was deviant, and in small towns the number of lost letters returned to deviant and nondeviant addressees were not significantly different.

The present purposes were three: (1) to test the hypothesis of no differ-

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ence in the numbers and percentages of lost letters returned by residents of a city versus those returned by residents of small rural communities, (2) to test the hypothesis of no difference in the numbers and percentages of lost letters returned by residents of a city or smaller rural communities if the addressees were socially or politically deviant, and (3) to test whether the locations in which lost letters were placed influenced the numbers and percentages returned from a city versus smaller rural communities.

METHOD

Studies A and B modified the previous designs (Bridges & Coady, 1996a) by adding and substituting new affiliations for addressees and substituting a new condition of community size, smaller 'rural' communities, for the smaller 'urban' communities and small towns. The conditions under which help is requested have been shown to influence the probability of helping, i.e., help is less likely to be offered to those with an 'out-of-town' address (Forbes & Gromoll, 1971). Thus, our destinations referred to whether a lost letter had an 'in-town' or 'out-of-town' Post Office Box address.

Distribution

In Study A, a total of 1,000 lost letters, i.e., 50 letters for each of five affiliations for addressees in two sizes of community and for two destinations, were distributed in Escambia County, Florida: 500 letters within the city limits of Pensacola (population $M=60,591$) and 500 in each of 21 smaller rural communities in Escambia County (M populations = 1729). In Study B, 1400 letters were distributed, i.e., 70 letters for each of five affiliations for addressees in two sizes of communities and for two destinations, with 700 letters being distributed in Pensacola and the same 21 smaller rural communities. Letters were distributed in incorporated and unincorporated areas of the smaller rural communities, for example, in or north of the town of Cantonment, Florida. Stamped envelopes were distributed in equal numbers in the aisles of stores, on frequently used sidewalks next to major thoroughfares, in and around phone booths and ATM machines, placed under the windshield wipers of parked vehicles, and on the ground within 6 feet of residential mailboxes in both Pensacola and smaller rural communities. A handwritten "Post-it[®]" note with the message "Found this letter near your car" was attached to the lost letters placed under vehicle wipers. A coded note was enclosed in each envelope to show whether it had been placed in Pensacola or a smaller rural community. Both studies were carried out over a 3-mo. period.

Destinations

The destinations were a rural Post Office Box in Molino, Florida (directly adjacent to Cantonment, Florida) for one-half of the letters that were

distributed in both Pensacola (out-of-town address) and in smaller rural communities (in-town address). (We believed Molino was small enough and well known enough to represent all rural communities as an "in-town" address.) Similarly, an urban Post Office Box in Pensacola, Florida, was used for the other one-half of the letters distributed in both Pensacola (in-town address) and smaller rural communities (out-of-town address). The letters in Studies A and B were addressed to Fran Bridges and Stevie Bridges, respectively; each was signed by "Sean" and "Jean," respectively. Each letter's address and message varied as the Deviant and Nondeviant conditions were manipulated in both studies, for example, in Study A letters were one of the following messages:

Date

Dear Fran,
I will be happy to contribute \$250 toward your college expenses (Control condition). Please drop by and pick up my donation.

Sean

or

Date

Dear Fran,
I will be happy to contribute \$250 for the Committee Against Legalized Prostitution (Nondeviant condition)/Committee For Legalized Prostitution (Deviant condition)/The Female Sex Workers Alliance of Northwest Florida (Deviant condition)/The Male Sex Workers Alliance of Northwest Florida (Deviant condition). Please drop by and pick up my donation.

Sean

In Study B, the Deviant and Nondeviant conditions manipulated were Stevie Bridges (Control) Drug Awareness and Resistance Education (DARE; Nondeviant), Committee Against Legalized Needle and Syringe Exchange (Nondeviant), Committee For Legalized Needle and Syringe Exchange (Deviant), and National Office for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) (Deviant).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 1,000 letters distributed in Study A and the 1400 in Study B, 403 (40.3%) and 637 letters (45.4%), respectively, were returned in the mail by the finders. In Study A, only 398 (39.8%) letters were considered for statistical analysis because five of the envelopes addressed to the Deviant conditions had been opened and their contents were removed. This prevented the researchers from determining whether these letters had been distributed in the city or in smaller rural communities. In both studies, the effect of addressees' affiliation was significantly associated with different rates of return of letters. The rates of return for each of the addressees' affiliations are given in Tables 1(A) and 2(B).

TABLE 1
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF LOCATION,
ADDRESSEES' AFFILIATION, AND POST OFFICE BOX: STUDY A

	Condition (Addressee)					Total
	Control	Nondeviant	Deviant			
	Fran Bridges	Against Prostitution	For Prostitution	Sex Workers		
			Female	Male		
City						
City Box, <i>n</i>	34	18	12	17	20	101
Rural Box, <i>n</i>	29	17	27	22	19	114
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	63	35	39	39	39	215
%	63.0	35.0	39.0	39.0	39.0	43.0
χ^2						20.9
<i>p</i>						.001
<i>N</i>						500
<i>ES</i> †						.204*
Rural Communities						
City Box, <i>n</i>	25	15	21	16	15	92
Rural Box, <i>n</i>	26	21	7	21	16	91
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	51	36	28	37	31	183
%	51.0	36.0	28.0	37.0	31.0	36.6
χ^2						13.5
<i>p</i>						.009
<i>N</i>						500
<i>ES</i> †						.164*
Total						
City Box, <i>n</i>	59	33	33	33	35	193
Rural Box, <i>n</i>	55	38	34	43	35	205
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	114	71	67	76	70	398
%	57.0	35.5	33.5	38.0	35.0	39.8
χ^2						31.8
<i>p</i>						.001
<i>N</i>						1000
<i>ES</i> †						.178*

†*ES* = Effect size. **p* = .05.

The effect of community size and addressees' affiliations were significantly associated with different rates of return in the city and smaller rural communities in Study A, return rates generally being larger from the city even in the Deviant conditions. From smaller rural communities, only one letter more was returned for the Nondeviant Committee against Legalized Prostitution affiliate than from the city. City residents returned 117 letters to Deviant affiliates compared to 95 letters returned from residents of smaller rural communities. Using *p* = .05, 193 letters were returned in the 'in-town'

TABLE 2
 NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF LOCATION,
 ADDRESSEES' AFFILIATION, AND POST OFFICE BOX: STUDY B

	Condition (Addressee)					Total
	Control	Nondeviant	Deviant			
	Stevie Bridges	D.A.R.E.	Against Needles	For Needles	NORML	
City						
City Box, <i>n</i>	38	33	33	31	27	162
Rural Box, <i>n</i>	41	30	30	31	28	160
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	79	63	63	62	55	322
%	56.4	45.0	45.0	44.3	39.3	46.0
χ^2						8.95
<i>p</i>						ns
<i>N</i>						700
<i>ES</i> †						.113*
Rural Communities						
City Box, <i>n</i>	36	33	33	27	29	158
Rural Box, <i>n</i>	41	34	31	24	27	157
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	77	67	64	51	56	315
%	55.0	47.9	45.7	36.4	40.0	45.0
χ^2						11.7
<i>p</i>						.02
<i>N</i>						700
<i>ES</i> †						.129*
Total						
City Box, <i>n</i>	74	66	66	58	56	320
Rural Box, <i>n</i>	82	64	61	55	55	317
Both Boxes						
<i>n</i>	156	130	127	113	111	637
%	55.7	46.4	45.4	40.4	39.6	45.5
χ^2						18.7
<i>p</i>						.001
<i>N</i>						1400
<i>ES</i> †						.116*

†*ES* = Effect size. **p* = .05.

condition, whereas 205 letters were returned in the 'out-of-town condition' [$\chi^2(N=1000) = .43$, ns, power = .09, effect size = .033] (Glantz, 1992).

Unexpectedly, there was considerable variation across addressees' affiliations in the rates of return both from the city and smaller rural communities. It was expected that as size of the communities' populations decreased, there would be an increase in the number of letters returned; however, the number of letters returned from the city was actually higher than that from smaller rural communities. As expected, returned rates from rural

communities were lower for the Deviant addressees; however, even the deviant Committee For Legalized Prostitution affiliation garnered a return rate of 33.5%. The over-all return rate from the smaller rural communities (36.6%) was 32 letters less than the return rate seen for the city (43.0%). The Deviant Committee For Legalized Prostitution did produce the expected decrease in return rates from the smaller rural communities in comparison to the city; however, the Nondeviant Committee *Against* Legalized Prostitution affiliation did not produce the expected increase in returns from the smaller rural communities compared to those returns from the city.

Community size and addressees' affiliations were significantly associated with different rates of return in only the smaller rural communities in Study B, rates being generally greater in the smaller rural communities except for those returns for the two Deviant affiliates National Office for the Reform of Marijuana Laws and Committee For Legalized Prostitution. Smaller rural communities' residents returned 107 letters to Deviant groups compared to 117 letters returned from city residents. Three hundred and twenty letters were returned in the 'in-town' condition, whereas 317 letters were returned in the 'out-of-town condition' [$\chi^2(N=1400)=.001$, ns, power=.05, effect size = .002].

It was expected, across addressees' affiliations, that there might be a difference in the number of letters returned from smaller rural communities. Over-all, smaller rural communities returned 315 letters, seven letters fewer than from the city. The Deviant Committee For Legalized Needle and Syringe Exchange affiliation did produce the expected decrease in returned mail from the smaller rural communities in comparison to the city; however, the Nondeviant Committee *Against* Needle and Syringe Exchange affiliation did not produce the expected increase in returns from the smaller rural communities compared to those returns from the city.

The present findings appear to show that an increase in community size does tend to be generally associated with an over-all increase in returns of lost letters even when Deviant affiliations are used as addressees. Study A's findings are somewhat consistent with those of Bridges and Coady (1996b) as over-all numbers of returned letters were dissimilar for Florida cities and small towns, and numbers of returned letters from Florida cities and smaller rural communities were dissimilar across all addressees' affiliations. Study B's findings are not consistent with those of others for small towns, as associated numbers of returned letters were dissimilar in Florida's smaller rural communities and the city across all addressees' affiliations (Bridges & Coady, 1996a; Bridges, 1996). Interestingly, these findings are consistent with others: the Deviant "Legalized Prostitution and Needle Exchange" groups had the lowest return rates, respectively, of all the affiliations (Bridges

& Coady, 1996a). Finally, both studies' outcomes are dissimilar to those of Forbes and Gromoll (1971) who reported lost letters bearing an "out-of-town" address were returned significantly less often than lost letters bearing an "in-town" address.

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