

ABORTION AFFILIATION, URBAN SIZE, AND GEOGRAPHIC BIAS OF RESPONSES TO LOST LETTERS¹

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Summary.—A study using 1800 “lost letters” was designed to test the hypothesis that returned responses would be greater in smaller rural communities (population $M=964$) than in a city (population=60,591) or the suburbs (population=195,847) unless the addressee was affiliated with a pro-abortion group. Returns to control, Committee For Free Abortion, and Committee Against Free Abortion affiliates were 37.2%, 24.0%, 29.3%, respectively. From the city, the number of returned letters was much larger than the number from the suburbs except for those letters with an affiliation to the pro-abortion condition. Returned letters from the city were fewer than those from smaller rural communities except those letters affiliated with the pro-abortion group. More letters affiliated with the pro-abortion condition were returned from the suburbs than from the smaller rural communities. The geographic condition influenced over-all rates of return. Rates were higher when letters were addressed to a city P.O. Box than to a rural one. Second, rates were also greater in smaller rural communities for letters bearing “in-town” (Molino) and “out-of-town” (Pensacola) addresses than those from the city bearing an “out-of-town” (Molino) address. These findings seem to indicate the possibility that there may be some geographic bias in the willingness of people to help a stranger in need by returning a lost letter.

The lost letter technique has been reported to be an accurate measure of community attitudes toward political organizations (Milgram, Mann, & Harter, 1965; Shotland, Berger, & Forsythe, 1970). From his use of political candidates in research, Milgram (1969a) concluded that “the lost letter technique is not very good for subtle issues, or in connection with issues that do not arouse very strong feelings. It only works for issues in which there is a clear-cut polarization and which arouse a high level of emotional involvement” (p. 264). Milgram (1969a) suggested that the rates of return of lost letters may vary as a function of the divisiveness of the groups being sampled. That is, the more strongly polarized the political candidates, the stronger the differences in responsiveness.

Abortion-related violence resulted in the deaths of three people in Pensacola, Florida in 1993 and 1994 as reported on an Internet site. Even though pro-abortion and anti-abortion committees are not political organizations, it can be hypothesized that, even several years after the fatal violence,

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public reaction would be strong enough that these addresses would still elicit different rates of return for assessing public attitudes.

Earlier research has suggested that there may be regional and geographic differences in rates of return of lost letters. Forbes and Gromoll (1971) reported that lost letters bearing an "in-town" address were returned more often than those letters bearing an "out-of-town" address. More specifically, they reported that a higher percentage of letters, bearing an "in-town" residential address, were returned from a medium-size community (population = 90,000) than those, bearing an "out-of-town" residential address, that were returned from very small towns (population $M_s < 1,000$) and another medium-size community.

Therefore, the present study first sought to assess whether the use of addressees' affiliations indicating that they were 'for' and 'against' abortion affected returned responses. Secondly, we sought to examine whether urban size and geographic conditions in the area originally affected by violence influenced the return of lost letters.

METHOD

The present experiment modified and extended the designs of others by changing the name of the control addressee and the "in-town" and "out-of-town" geographic condition and adding a new urban-size condition and P.O. Boxes instead of a residential address to a geographic condition (Forbes & Gromoll, 1971; Kunz & Fernquist, 1989). The control addressee was renamed Fran Bridges, the affiliations of other addressees remained the same as the former study and were the Committee For Free Abortion and the Committee Against Free Abortion. All addressees' affiliations were in care of Fran Bridges.

Eighteen hundred letters (100 letters per three affiliations for addressees \times three urban sizes \times two geographic conditions) were distributed in Escambia County, Florida: 600 envelopes within the city limits of Pensacola (population = 60,591), 600 envelopes in suburban areas (population = 195,847) outside the city limits of Pensacola but south of and including Cantonment, and 600 in each of 20 smaller rural communities (population $M = 964$) in Escambia County (population = 275,706). Five hundred and forty of the rural letters were distributed north of the town of Cantonment. Sixty rural letters were dropped west of Highway 173 (Blue Angel Parkway) and Highway 297 (Pine Forest Road) but no further north than Interstate 10 and no further south than Highway 292 (Gulf Beach Highway). Stamped envelopes were dropped or placed in equal numbers in the aisles of stores, on frequently used sidewalks next to major thoroughfares, in and around phone booths and automatic (bank) teller machines or placed under the windshield wipers of parked vehicles and on the ground within 6 feet of residential mail-

boxes in both Pensacola and smaller rural communities. A handwritten "Post-it®" note with the message "Found this letter near your car" was attached to those letters placed under a vehicle's wiper. In addition, a coded note was enclosed in each envelope to show whether it had been distributed in Pensacola, a suburb, or a smaller rural community. The study was conducted over 3 mo.

Half of the stamped and sealed envelopes were addressed to a city P.O. Box in Pensacola, Florida and the rest to a rural P.O. Box in Molino, Florida. These envelopes were distributed in equal numbers in Escambia county's biggest city (Pensacola), suburban areas, and smaller rural communities. None of the envelopes bore return addresses. Letters addressed to P.O. Boxes in Pensacola or Molino were distributed in the city of Pensacola or smaller rural communities, respectively ("in-town" geographic condition). On the other hand, letters addressed to Pensacola or Molino P.O. Boxes were distributed in smaller rural communities or the city of Pensacola, respectively (out-of-town geographic condition). This was the geographic condition.

The letters were addressed to Fran and each was signed by "Kelly." Each letter's address and message varied as the addressees' affiliations were manipulated in the study. The wording of the messages was identical to that used by earlier researchers (Forbes & Gromoll, 1971). For example, letters contained one of the following messages:

Date

Dear Fran,

It was nice to see you again. Please tell Mary "hello" for me (control addressee affiliation).

Kelly

or

Date

Dear Fran,

I will be happy to contribute \$500.00 for the Committee For Free Abortion (pro-abortion addressee affiliation)/Committee Against Free Abortion (anti-abortion addressee affiliation).

Please drop by and pick it up.

Kelly

RESULTS

Of 1800 letters distributed, 543 (30.2%) were mailed by the finders (considered an altruistic response). The effect of addressees' affiliation was associated with significantly different rates of return of letters. The rates of return in each of the conditions are depicted in Table 1. The effect of urban size and addressees' affiliation were associated with significantly different rates of return in the city, suburbs, and smaller rural communities. From the

TABLE 1
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF AFFILIATION OF ADDRESSEE, LOCATION, AND P.O. BOX

Condition (Addressee)	City				Suburbs				Rural Communities				Total			
	City Box	Rural Box	Both Boxes		City Box	Rural Box	Both Boxes		City Box	Rural Box	Both Boxes		City Box	Rural Box	Both Boxes	
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%
Control	37	34	71	35.5	33	33	66	33.0	36	50	86	43.0	106	117	223	37.2
For Abortion	44	4	48	24.0	47	2	49	24.5	43	4	47	23.5	134	10	144	24.0
Against Abortion	26	30	56	28.0	20	22	42	21.0	30	48	78	39.0	76	100	176	29.3
Total	107	68	175	29.2	100	57	157	26.2	109	102	211	35.2	316	227	543	30.2
χ^2			6.60/8.94*				7.89				18.61/12.82**				4.99/20.42†/7.73‡	
<i>p</i> <			.04/.003				.02				.001/.001				.001/.001/.005	
Power			.62/.89				.71				.99/.97				.99/.99/.83	

*Geographic condition: city (out-of-town) vs smaller rural communities (in-town). **Geographic condition: city (out-of-town) vs smaller rural communities (out-of-town). †Geographic condition: P.O. Box addresses. ‡Geographic condition excluding suburbs: P.O. Box addresses.

city, returned letters were more frequent than those from the suburbs except for those letters with an affiliation to the Committee For Free Abortion. Returned letters from the city were fewer than those from smaller rural communities except those letters with an affiliation to the Committee For Free Abortion. More letters affiliated with the Committee For Free Abortion were returned from the suburbs than from the smaller rural communities.

The effect of geographic condition was significantly associated with different over-all rates of return. There were significantly larger percentages of lost letters associated with the city (Pensacola) P.O. Box than with the rural one (Molino) even when suburban returns were excluded. There were larger percentages of lost letters, bearing "in-town" (Molino) and "out-of-town" (Pensacola) P.O. Box addresses, significantly associated with smaller rural communities than letters with the city bearing the "out-of-town" (Molino) P.O. Box address.

DISCUSSION

Unexpectedly, across kinds of addressees, there was significant variation in returned responses from the city, suburbs, and smaller rural communities. These findings are consistent with those of Kunz and Fernquist (1989) for the identical addressees' affiliations, as there were significant differences in returned responses across all addressees' affiliations. They had a 28% rate of return for the pro-abortion affiliate. Kunz and Fernquist (1989) did not report how many "pro-abortion" letters were returned to their respective cities. Thus, these present findings are consistent with some (Bridges & Coady, 1996a, 1996b; Bridges, 1996) but not with others (Bridges, Welsh, Graves, & Sonn, 1997) as there were significant differences in the number and percentages of returned letters were found in Florida in all three locations where letters were dropped. However, our findings are not consistent with those of Bridges and Coady (1996a) as significant differences in returns of letters were found in smaller rural communities across all addressees' affiliations. It was expected that as the 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 smaller rural communities was greater than that from the city which, in turn, was higher than that from suburban areas. This finding is consistent with Milgram's (1970) hypothesis that in small towns people help others more often than in cities. Also, this finding is in agreement with Bridges and Coady (1996a) as the number of returned letters from a Florida city was larger than that from suburban areas but not from small towns.

Geographic conditions did significantly influence returned responses. First, rates of return were significantly greater when letters were addressed to a city (Pensacola) P.O. Box than a rural one (Molino) even when subur-

ban returns were excluded. Interestingly, only 10 (of 300) letters for the pro-abortion affiliate were returned to the rural (Molino) P.O. Box address from all three locations at which letters were dropped. Second, the present findings are not consistent with those of Forbes and Gromoll (1971) as returned responses were significantly greater in smaller rural communities for letters bearing "in-town" (Molino) and "out-of-town" (Pensacola) P.O. Box addresses than those from the city bearing the "out-of-town" (Molino) P.O. Box address. Thus, the present findings seem to indicate that there may be some geographic bias in the willingness of people to help some strangers, that is, regardless of the address on a lost letter, a stranger in need is more likely to have a lost letter returned from a smaller rural community than from a city.

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