

## DIFFERENCES IN LOST LETTER RESPONSES FROM A SEASIDE CITY<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—Of 75 letters “lost” in the Florida Panhandle, 33 (44%) were returned in the mail by the finders (the altruistic response). Addressees’ affiliations were significantly associated with different rates of return; fewer emotive Intercontinental Gay and Lesbian Outdoors Organization addressees were returned than nonemotive ones. The technique for power analysis by Gillett (1996) was applied to data from an earlier study and indicated our sample of 75 subjects would still yield a desired power level, i.e., .80, for the likely effect sizes. Statistical power was .83, and the effect was medium in size at .34.

Researchers developed the lost letter technique as a research method of unobtrusively indicating public opinion toward various institutions, political organizations, and groups, including those perceived as extremist political organizations (Milgram, Mann, & Harter, 1965). Both Hansson and Slade (1977) and later Whitehead and Metzger (1981) tested Milgram, *et al.*’s technique (1965) for measuring public responses and found that not only community size, but interaction with deviance or emotive status influences helpful responses displayed to strangers. Johnson and Powell (1975) found that political affiliation was *not* related to rates of return of lost letters but was to frequency of passersby who actually responded to but did not take apparently lost letters away with them. They suggested that researchers using this technique should look at more than just the rates of return of lost letters. In keeping with their suggestion we examined the *take and return rate* and the *take but not return rate* across three addressees’ affiliations; they were one fictitious emotive affiliate and two nonemotive group affiliates with different goals. We also examined the rates of return by sex and race.

### METHOD

The present experiment modified and extended the design of others

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(Johnson & Powell, 1975; Bridges & Thompson, 1999; Bridges, Thompson, & Willers, 2000) by adding new affiliations for the lost letters, no longer addressed *in care of* one of the researchers, and substituting a new community condition (a seaside city). The addressees were named the Intercontinental Gay and Lesbian Outdoors Organization, Coalition for Promoting Leisure-time Physical Activity, and the Physical Activity Avoidance Taskforce. The content of the letters for these addressees' affiliations indicated that a \$250 contribution was available if someone from one of the respective groups would drop by and pick it up immediately. Each envelope was hand-coded according to its cell assignment in the experimental design and its individual count by lightly penciling in the number in the lower left- and right-hand corners, respectively, of the back of the envelope.

A total of 75 letters (25 letters per three affiliations for addressees) were distributed in equal numbers on sidewalks and walkways inside and outside malls, restaurants, grocery stores, and other retail business establishments in greater Gulf Breeze, Florida (incorporated population=8,033). This white-collar city is located at the tip of a 25-mile long, 3/4-mile wide peninsula, and is 2 mi. from the Gulf of Mexico in Santa Rosa County (population=115,186). The population of the surrounding unincorporated area plus Pensacola Beach is 24,013 persons. The median age and income is 38.3 yr. and \$44,491, respectively. In addition, dropping letters for the three affiliates were matched for the day of the week, time of day (morning vs afternoon), and general weather conditions, with equal numbers of control, emotive, and nonemotive letters distributed on any given day. Each of the 75 letters was systematically observed by a researcher who sat in a vehicle with a direct view of the situation or who stood in close proximity of each letter and passerby. Each researcher, while posing as an innocent bystander, recorded the sex and race of the letter finder who took the letter away with them to possibly return in the mail. Each typewritten letter was written to "Steve" and was sent by "Lindi." The distribution of letters occurred during the month of October 1999. Letter retrievers were given three weeks after the last letter was dropped to return letters in the mail.

## RESULTS

### *Take and Return Rate*

All 75 letters were taken, but only 33 (44.0%) were returned in the mail by the finders (the altruistic response). The addressees' affiliations were associated with significantly different rates of return of letters [ $\chi^2(N=75)=10.07$ ,  $p<.008$ , power=.83, effect size=.34]. Interestingly, subdividing the contingency table three ways produced limited significant variation in return responses with only 20.0% of letters being returned for the affiliate, Intercontinental Gay and Lesbian Outdoors Organization, compared to 64.0%

for the Physical Activity Avoidance Taskforce and 48.0% for the Coalition for Promoting Leisure-time Physical Activity affiliate [ $\chi^2(N=50)=8.21, p < .005$ , power = .91, effect size = .41] and [ $\chi^2(N=50)=3.21$ , ns, power = .55, effect size = .25], respectively. Further, 48.0% of letters were returned for the affiliate, Coalition for Promoting Leisure-time Physical Activity, compared to 64.0% for the Physical Activity Avoidance Taskforce [ $\chi^2(N=50)=.73$ , ns, power = .20, effect size = .12].

#### *Take and Return vs Taken But Not Returned*

Of the 33 letters taken away by men and 42 letters taken away by women, 15 letters (45.5%) and 18 letters (42.9%), respectively, were returned in the mail. Of the 71 letters taken away by Euro-Americans and four letters taken away by nonwhites, 30 letters (42.3%) and three letters (75%), respectively, were returned in the mail. The data for both measures of response in each of the conditions are depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
RESPONSES BY AFFILIATION, SEX, AND RACE

Condition (Addressee) Total	Persons Who					
	Take, Do Not Mail			Take and Mail		
	<i>n</i>	Sex M/F*	Race W/NW†	<i>n</i>	Sex M/F*	Race W/NW†
Intercontinental Gay and Lesbian Outdoors Organization	20	8/12	20/0	5	2/3	5/0
Promote physical activity	13	6/7	13/0	12	7/5	11/1
Avoid physical activity	9	4/5	8/1	16	6/10	14/2
Total	42	18/24	41/1	33	15/18	30/3

\*M = Male, F = Female. †W = White, NW = Nonwhite.

#### DISCUSSION

The rate of return of lost letters was higher (44.0%) than expected. This was consistent with Waugh, Plake, and Rienzi (2000) who reported higher rate of response albeit for a single urban community than for a gay marriage and control addressee. The present findings contrast with low response rates (Levinson, Pesina, and Rienzi, 1993; Bridges, 1996) for one size of community (a county) and (Bridges & Rodriguez, 2000) communities for two sizes of waterfront. It also agrees with others (Bridges, 1996; Bridges, Welsh, Graves, & Sonn, 1997; Bridges, *et al.*, 2000), using different homosexual and "nonemotive" affiliated addressees.

As expected, across kinds of addressees, affiliations were associated with different rates of return of 75 letters. That is, a lost letter was less likely to be returned in the mail for the Intercontinental Gay and Lesbian Outdoors Organization. According to previous research, less "perceived similarity" to

the Intercontinental Gay and Lesbian Outdoors Organization than the other two affiliates may explain some of the observed lack of responsiveness to lost letters (Byrne, 1971; Sole, Marton, & Hornstein, 1975; Sears, Brown, & Ditto, 1982; Sears, 1983). This finding may be subject to more than one interpretation and could also reflect that people in the location of distribution have little regard for having a homosexual outdoors organization in their seaside city. Given the small sample size, it is not clear that this interpretation is correct. Had there been a larger number of returns for that affiliate, thereby producing a smaller effect, or less, rather than greater, negative public perception would have been suggested.

Our findings indicated that women returned only three letters more than men, which is consistent with some (Lesk & Zippel, 1975; Iwata, 1977; Amato, 1981b) but not with another (Amato, 1981a). The race of the letter finders seemed not to be related to overall mail returns. This is not consistent with Bolton (1974) who reported an African-American group returned fewer lost letters than a Euro-American group in a Southern community.

In the city of Pensacola, across the bay from Gulf Breeze, the Advocates for Battered and Abused Women, Advocates for Battered and Abused Men, and Advocates for Battered and Abused Lesbians were significantly associated with the rates of return of the letters [ $\chi_2^2(N=300)=16.15, p=.001, \text{power}=.97, \text{effect size}=.23$ ] (Bridges, Williamson, Thompson, & Windsor, 2001). Applying Gillett's technique for power analysis conditional upon information from our earlier study (Bridges, *et al.*, 2001) our smaller sample size of 75 subjects should yield a desired power level, i.e., 0.8, for the likely effect sizes Gillett (1996). That is, our statistical power was .83 and the effect was medium in size (Cohen, 1988) at .34 for the significant association of addressees' affiliations and rates of return. Therefore, according to Tables 2 and 6 in Gillett's article (1996), the present study needed 69 observations and certainly no less than 58 observations, respectively, but we made 75.

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