

## DIFFERENCES IN LOST LETTER AND POSTAL CARD RETURNS FROM CITIES AND SMALLER URBAN COMMUNITIES<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—Two field studies comprised of two experiments each used “570 lost letters and 720 lost postal cards” to test the hypothesis that *returns* would be greater from smaller urban communities (population  $M = 63,997$ ) than from cities (population  $M = 93,242$ ) unless the addressee was affiliated with a socially or politically deviant group. The effect of deviance altered return rates but only in Study B’s letter experiment. In Study A, the effects of location and political deviance on letter returns from cities were greater than those from smaller urban communities even when the person in need of help was affiliated with the highly deviant “Socialists, Militia, or Aryan-Front” conditions. Returned postal cards from cities were fewer than from smaller urban communities. Cost did not influence returns. In Study B, returned letters and postal cards from cities were fewer than from smaller urban communities even when the person was affiliated with the “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Cross-dressing” addressee affiliations.

Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) developed the lost letter technique to measure helping behavior, using as a dependent variable subjects’ willingness to pick up and mail lost but stamped and addressed letters. Milgram (1970) hypothesized that in cities people help others less often than in small towns. Hansson and Slade (1977) and Whitehead and Metzger (1981) tested this hypothesis and addressed letters to fictitious persons, considered to differ in evident conformity to conventional social norms to use the lost-letter technique to measure helping behavior. In both studies there was no difference in the urban return rate of lost letters regardless of whether the addressee was deviant or not, whereas small towns returned fewer lost letters if the addressee was deviant. In contrast, the second experiment of a recent study yielded a difference in the urban rate of returned lost letters depending upon whether the addressee was deviant, and in small towns a nearly equal number of lost letters were returned to deviant and nondeviant addressees (Bridges & Coady, 1996b).

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## METHOD

Study A's two experiments modified the prior designs (Hansson & Slade, 1977; Rushton, 1978; Hedge & Yousif, 1992) by adding new affiliations for addressees and substituting a new community size condition (smaller urban community for 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 in costly situations (Morgan, 1978). Thus our cost condition referred to the amount of travel effort required by someone to return a lost letter or postal card to a US Post Office, US Postal Service Curb box, or mailbox. Study B's two experiments modified the research designs of others (Rushton, 1978; Whitehead & Metzger, 1981; Levinson, Pesina, & Rienzi, 1993) by adding two additional affiliations for addressees and a new community size (smaller urban community). Levinson, Pesina, and Rienzi (1993) used lost postal cards to expose subjects to three possible experimental treatments: (a) an elderly control addressee, (b) a deviant gay male artist addressee, and (c) a deviant lesbian artist addressee. The study had such a low return rate of postal cards that statistical analysis was prevented. Whitehead and Metzger's (1981) use of deviancy and nondeviancy was based upon whether the addressee was affiliated with the "Gay Pleasure Alliance."

In Study A, a total of 320 lost letters and 360 postal cards were placed under the windshield wipers of vehicles parked in Broward County, Florida: 160 envelopes and 180 postal cards in each of five cities east and in each six smaller urban communities west of Interstate 95 (population  $M_s = 93,242$  and  $63,997$ , respectively). Study B employed 250 letters and 360 postal cards with 125 envelopes and 180 postal cards being distributed in the same five cities and six smaller urban communities. A handwritten "Post-it<sup>®</sup>" note with the message "Found this letter/postal card near your car." was attached to the lost letter or postal card which was then placed under a vehicle's wiper.

Study A placed one-half of the letters and postal cards under wipers of vehicles parked within 100 feet of a US Post Office, parked within 100 feet of US Postal Service Curb boxes, and parked within 25 feet of residential mailboxes in cities and smaller urban communities. This was the low-cost condition. The other one-half were placed under wipers of vehicles parked at least one-half mile from and out of visible sight of these offices, curb boxes, and mailboxes in cities and smaller urban communities. This was the high-cost condition. A coded note was enclosed in each typewritten envelope or a date code was incorporated into the postal card's message to indicate under what cost (Study A only) and community size conditions it had been placed. The letters and postal cards in Studies A and B were addressed to R. J. Smith and B. W. Johnson, respectively, at a post office box number in Hollywood (Broward County), Florida. Each letter's address and postal

card's message varied as the conditions of deviancy and nondeviancy were manipulated in both studies. For example, in Study A postal cards employed one of the following messages:

Date

Dear Jim,

Thank you for your offer to contribute \$250 for the Committee To Support Florida Viet Nam Veterans (controls)/Domestic Partnerships (somewhat deviant)/Demokratic Socialists of Florida: Lesbigan Caucus (highly deviant)/Florida Militia Against Government Abuse (highly deviant)/AryanFront: White Nationalist Movement (highly deviant). Please bring your donation to the next meeting which will be on (date code).

Susan

In Study B, the postal card conditions of deviancy and nondeviancy that were manipulated were Elderly Artists (control), Gay Male Artists (highly deviant), Lesbian Artists (highly deviant), Bisexual Artists (highly deviant), and Cross-dressing Artists (highly deviant).

#### RESULTS

Of 320 letters and 360 postal cards distributed in Study A, 95 (29.7%) and 49 (13.6%), respectively, were returned in the mail by the finder. The effect of addressee's affiliation did not alter letter or postal card return rates for the (a) Florida Viet Nam Veterans, (b) Domestic Partnerships, (c) Demokratic Socialists of Florida: Lesbigan Caucus, (d) Florida Militia Against Government Abuse, and (e) AryanFront: White Nationalist Movement conditions [ $\chi_4^2(N=160)=3.89, p > .05, \text{power}=.30$ ]<sup>2</sup> and [ $\chi_4^2(N=180)=6.47, p > .05, \text{power}=.49$ ], for letters and postcards, respectively. The percentage of mail (letters versus postal cards) returned for each of the addressees' affiliations were (a) 28.1% vs 9.7%; (b) 37.5% vs 13.9%; (c) 31.3% vs 22.2%; (d) 29.7% vs 9.7%; and (e) 21.9% vs 12.5%. The effect of community size and addressees' affiliation were associated with different *letter* return rates in cities [ $\chi_4^2(N=320)=9.70, p < .05, \text{power}=.70$ ], rates being generally greater in cities than in smaller urban communities even when addressees were highly deviant. The effect of community size and addressees' affiliations on *postal card* return responses from the smaller urban communities were not significantly greater than from those from the cities, even when the addressees were affiliated with the highly deviant groups [ $\chi_4^2(N=180)=7.87, p > .05, \text{power}=.59$ ]. Urban residents returned 55 letters and 21 postal cards compared to 40 letters and 28 postal cards returned from smaller urban communities residents. Sixty-five letters and 34 postal cards were returned in the low-cost condition, whereas 30 letters and 15 postal cards were returned in the high-cost condition [ $\chi_2^2(N=95)=2.27, p > .05, \text{power}=.32$ ]

<sup>2</sup>For calculating the estimate of power cf. Glantz (1992, p. 180 ff).

and  $[\chi_2^2(N=49)=2.59, p>.05, \text{power}=.36]$ , respectively. The return rates for each of the addressees' affiliations are given in Table 1.

Of 250 letters and 360 postal cards distributed in Study B, 33 (13.2%) and 20 (5.6%), respectively, were returned in the mail by the finder. The effect of the addressees' affiliation did alter return rates for the (a) Elderly

TABLE 1  
STUDY A: NUMBER OF LETTERS AND CARDS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION  
OF LOCATION OF LETTERDROP AND ADDRESSEES' AFFILIATIONS

| Condition<br>(Addressee)   | Letters  |      |          |      |          |      | Postal Cards |      |          |      |          |      |
|----------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|--------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
|                            | City     |      | Suburb   |      | Total    |      | City         |      | Suburb   |      | Total    |      |
|                            | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i>     | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    |
| Viet Nam Vets<br>(control) | 12       | 37.5 | 6        | 18.8 | 18       | 28.1 | 3            | 8.3  | 4        | 11.1 | 7        | 9.7  |
| Domestic partnerships      | 16       | 50.0 | 8        | 25.0 | 24       | 37.5 | 5            | 13.9 | 5        | 13.9 | 10       | 13.9 |
| Demokracic<br>Socialists   | 13       | 40.6 | 7        | 21.9 | 20       | 31.3 | 5            | 13.9 | 11       | 30.6 | 16       | 22.2 |
| Florida Militia            | 9        | 28.1 | 10       | 31.3 | 19       | 29.7 | 3            | 8.3  | 4        | 11.1 | 7        | 9.7  |
| AryanFront                 | 5        | 15.6 | 9        | 28.1 | 14       | 21.9 | 5            | 13.9 | 4        | 11.1 | 9        | 12.5 |
| Total                      | 55       | 34.4 | 40       | 25.0 | 95       | 29.7 | 21           | 11.7 | 28       | 15.6 | 49       | 13.6 |

Artists, (b) Gay Male Artists, (c) Lesbian Artists, (d) Bisexual Artists, and (e) Cross-dressing Artists conditions  $[\chi_4^2(N=250)=29.53, p<.001, \text{power}=.99]$  and  $[\chi_4^2(N=360)=1.06, p>.05, \text{power}=.11]$ , respectively. The percentage of mail (letters versus postal cards) returned for each of the addressees' affiliations were (a) 36.0% vs 6.9%; (b) 10.0% vs 4.2%; (c) 6.0% vs 4.2%; (d) 4.0% vs 5.6%; and (e) 10.0% vs 6.9%. The effect of community size and addressees' affiliations on *letter* returns from smaller urban communities was generally greater even when the addressees were affiliated with the highly deviant groups  $[\chi_4^2(N=125)=26.90, p<.001, \text{power}=.99]$ . The effect of community size and addressees' affiliations on *postal card* returns from

TABLE 2  
STUDY B: NUMBER OF LETTERS AND CARDS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION  
OF LOCATION OF LETTERDROP AND ADDRESSEES' AFFILIATIONS

| Condition<br>(Addressee)     | Letters  |      |          |      |          |      | Postal Cards |     |          |      |          |     |
|------------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|--------------|-----|----------|------|----------|-----|
|                              | City     |      | Suburb   |      | Total    |      | City         |     | Suburb   |      | Total    |     |
|                              | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i>     | %   | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %   |
| Elderly Artists<br>(control) | 4        | 16.0 | 14       | 56.0 | 18       | 36.0 | 2            | 5.6 | 3        | 8.3  | 5        | 6.9 |
| Gay Artists                  | 0        | 0.0  | 5        | 20.0 | 5        | 10.0 | 2            | 5.6 | 1        | 2.8  | 3        | 4.2 |
| Lesbian Artists              | 0        | 0.0  | 3        | 12.0 | 3        | 6.0  | 3            | 8.3 | 0        | 0.0  | 3        | 4.2 |
| Bisexual Artists             | 2        | 8.0  | 0        | 0.0  | 2        | 4.0  | 0            | 0.0 | 4        | 11.1 | 4        | 5.6 |
| Cross-dressing               | 1        | 4.0  | 4        | 16.0 | 5        | 10.0 | 1            | 2.8 | 4        | 11.1 | 5        | 6.9 |
| Total                        | 7        | 5.6  | 26       | 20.8 | 33       | 13.2 | 8            | 4.4 | 12       | 6.7  | 20       | 5.6 |

smaller urban communities was not significantly greater even when the addressees were affiliated with the highly deviant groups [ $\chi_4^2(N=180)=5.89$ ,  $p>.05$ , power=.45]. Urban residents returned only 7 letters and 8 postal cards compared to 26 letters and 12 postal cards returned from smaller urban communities' residents. The returns for each of the addressees' affiliations are given in Table 2.

#### DISCUSSION

Unexpectedly, across kinds of addressees, there were larger numbers and percentages of lost letters but not of postal cards associated with the cities than with the smaller urban communities in Study A. Just the opposite was found in Study B, with larger numbers and percentages of letters only associated with smaller urban communities than the cities. Study A's findings are consistent with those of Bridges and Coady (1996a) as associated numbers of returned letters were similar in Florida's smaller urban communities across all addressees' affiliations. Study B's findings are not consistent with those of Bridges and Coady (1996b) as over-all numbers of returned letters were similar for Florida cities and smaller urban communities, and numbers of returned letters from Florida cities were similar across all addressees' affiliations. Finally, both studies' outcomes are dissimilar to those of Forbes and Gromoll (1971) who reported identical letter return rates in both large cities and medium size suburbs. Power analysis for the ten statistical measures used in this study was calculated using the program by Glantz (1992, p. 180 ff) and only four of these yielded power estimates of less than .45. As such, this limited statistical power may have been a factor in the return mail associated with addressees' affiliations.

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