

## GAY MARRIAGE AFFILIATION AND LOCATION IN RETURN OF LOST LETTERS: REPLY TO WAUGH, PLAKE, AND RIENZI (2000)<sup>1</sup>

F. STEPHEN BRIDGES

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

*Summary.*—Reinspection of Waugh, Plake, and Rienzi's 2000 data allowed for several additional analyses. Statistical confirmation was found for no more negative attitudes toward gay marriage as measured by returned responses among churchgoers than among the general public. Confirmation was also found for their previous conclusion that the putative gay marriage controversy among Christian church attendees would be greater than among the general public, but for reasons different from those they proposed. Finally, it is argued that the limitations for the lost letter technique in "prohibiting fine distinctions" is not always correct because their analysis of one research question seemed *not* too subtle a distinction for the technique.

The lost letter technique has been used several times to assess community attitudes toward homosexual and other issues of sexual orientation (Whitehead & Metzger, 1981; Levinson, Pesina, & Rienzi, 1993; Bridges, 1996; Bridges, Welsh, Graves, & Sonn, 1997; Bridges & Rodriguez, 2000; Bridges, Anzalone, & Anzalone, unpublished). Waugh, Plake, and Rienzi (2000) used the technique to assess attitudes toward gay marriage among select Christian and public groups. They distributed 100 lost letters in Christian church parking lots and another 100 in public parking lots. Half of the letters distributed in each type of parking lot were addressed to the "Gay Marriage Foundation" and half to a neutrally named foundation.

Waugh, *et al.* (2000) hypothesized that first they would "find evidence that gay marriage is a controversial topic." They reported support for this hypothesis when significantly more neutral letters addressed to "Blue Sky Foundation" were returned than letters addressed to the "Gay Marriage Foundation" from both locations where letters were distributed. Recently, these findings have been supported (Bridges, 1996; Bridges, *et al.*, 1997; Bridges, *et al.*, unpublished), but not by others (Bridges & Rodriguez, 2000) using the lost letter technique to assess community attitudes toward homosexuals and other issues concerning sexual orientation.

Second, Waugh, *et al.* (2000) hypothesized "that the controversy among Christian church attendees would be greater than in the general public" (p.

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

216). The apparent meaning was that they expected “greater differences in rates of return between the addressees’ affiliations” as indicated by a larger difference in the number of returned letters among churchgoers but not among the general public. They reported no support for this second hypothesis when no differences in the rates of return were found: “Return rates for the Christian church parking lots and the general public parking lots were not significantly different for the two conditions” (p. 217). Given the output of their statistical analysis, Waugh, *et al.* apparently referred to addressees’ affiliations as the two conditions, rather than locations of letter distribution. Interestingly, there was evidence of a difference in rates of return (but no support for their second hypothesis) in the specific notes and statistical analyses contained in Table 1 of their study, i.e., “<sup>a</sup>Affiliation on return rate of letters at church placement ( $\chi_1^2 = 13.39, p < .001$ )” (p. 217) and “<sup>b</sup>Affiliation on return rate of letters in public ( $\chi_1^2 = 14.46, p < .001$ )” (p. 217). Table 1 indicated that addressees’ affiliations were significantly associated with rates of return for the churchgoers and for the general public. With these tabular data Waugh, *et al.* have not supported their second hypothesis because there actually was a larger difference in rates of return among churchgoers and among the general public. Waugh, *et al.* concluded their article by suggesting “that gay marriage may be a controversial topic in this area of California; however, results did not support the hypothesis that controversy among Christian church attendees would be greater than among the general public” (p. 218). So it seems that, regardless of the results, this conclusion still remained the same, but for reasons different from what Waugh, *et al.* had proposed.

According to Waugh, *et al.*’s summary (2000), “The limitations of the lost letter technique prohibit fine distinctions; however, one may infer attitudes toward gay marriage may not be more negative among Christian church attendees than in the general public” (p. 215). However, no statistical evidence for this inference was present in the article. Therefore, the present study reexamined data of their Table 1 and found (1) no significant difference associated with location of distribution (i.e., 59 church and 52 public parking lots, returned and 41 and 48 not returned, respectively) of the returned responses for both gay marriage and neutral addressees [ $\chi_1^2(N=200) = .73, ns$ ], and (2) no significant association of location ( $ns = 20$  and 16 for church and public lots) with returned responses for the gay marriage addressee only [ $\chi_1^2(N=100) = .39, ns$ ; 30 and 34, respectively, not returned]. The present findings support Waugh, *et al.*’s inference of no more negative attitudes toward gay marriage as suggested by returned responses for people who were presumably churchgoers than among the general public.

Finally, Waugh, *et al.* (2000) have, in fact, supported the basic premise of the lost letter technique, namely, that the probability of lost letters being

returned depends on the social and political attributes of the addressees' affiliations. With regard to the limitations of the lost letter technique in "prohibiting fine distinctions" (p. 215), it seems the gay marriage analysis (but not the location analysis) by Waugh, *et al.* was *not* too subtle a distinction.

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