

URBAN SIZE DIFFERENCES IN INCIDENCE OF ALTRUISTIC BEHAVIOR¹

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Summary.—Two field experiments using 828 “lost letters” tested the hypothesis that altruism would be higher in small urban communities or towns than in cities unless the person needing help was a social deviant. The effect of deviance did alter return rates in both studies. In Study A, the effect of location and social deviance on altruistic responses from cities was generally *greater* than from smaller communities, except when the person in need of help was affiliated with the highly deviant prostitute conditions. In Study B, altruistic responses from cities were generally *less* than those from small towns even when the needy person was affiliated with the Communist or needle-exchange conditions.

Milgram (1970) proposed an overload theory for urban and rural differences in response to an altruistic model. He contended that city dwellers, in adapting to stimulus overload caused by increasing population densities, would curtail or limit the depth and breadth of social contacts. Consequently, Milgram (1970) suggested that people in cities would be generally more indifferent to unimportant others and less likely to make distinctions between unimportant others than would people in small towns. Hansson and Slade (1977) tested a Milgram-derived hypothesis regarding altruism, that is, that helping behavior will occur less frequently in urban than rural settings. Both Hansson and Slade (1977) and later Whitehead and Metzger (1981) reported that not only community size but interaction with deviant status affects altruism displayed to strangers. They addressed letters to fictitious persons, considered to differ in conformity to conventional social norms and, using the “Lost Letter Technique” (Milgram, Mann, & Harter, 1965), attempted to measure helping behavior. Hansson and Slade’s (1977) subjects were exposed to three possible experimental treatments: (a) a control addressee, M. J. Davis, P.O. Box #, Tulsa, Oklahoma, (b) a somewhat deviant addressee, Dandee Davis, care of the Pink Panther Lounge, and (c) a deviant addressee, M. J. Davis, care of the Friends of the Communist Party. These researchers concluded that there was no difference in the urban return rate of lost letters regardless of whether the addressee was deviant or nondeviant, whereas rural dwellers mailed back fewer lost letters if the addressee was deviant. Their use of deviancy-nondeviancy was based upon whether the addressee was a “Friend(s) of the Communist Party.”

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STUDY A: PROSTITUTES

Bolton (1974) noted that for the "Lost Letter Technique" to be a valid measure of community attitudes toward political organizations, it must include both a large number of letters per treatment cell and only issues that evoke strong, polarizing, emotional responses. The present experiment modified Hansson and Slade's (1977) design by adding two experimental conditions. Specifically, two new socially deviant addressees were added to the design and the Communist addressee was changed to another deviant name. In addition, all addressees were renamed B. J. Wilson, except for Dandee Wilson now in care of the 8-Ball Lounge and Billiards establishment. Thus, we employed as manipulations of deviancy-nondeviancy whether B. J. Wilson was affiliated with "Friends of the Florida Prostitutes' Education Project," "Supporters of Legalized Prostitution," or "Coalition Advocating Safer Hustling." Researchers (Rist, Haggerty, & Gibbons, 1974; Weitzer, 1991) have reported urban-rural differences in the public's perceptions of prostitution, with more rural people providing strong admonishments. Even though the deviant affiliations were not political organizations, we hypothesized that public reaction would be so strong that the addressee conditions would still serve as appropriate manipulations of social deviancy and as valid measures of public opinion.

Procedure

A total of 420 stamped letters were dropped in Broward County, Florida; 210 envelopes in each of five cities east of Interstate 95 (population $M=93,242$) and 210 in six smaller urban communities west of Interstate 95 (population $M=63,997$). Stamped envelopes were dropped in equal numbers in the aisles of stores, on sidewalks next to major thoroughfares, and in or near phone booths in both the cities and smaller urban communities. A coded note was enclosed in each envelope to show whether it had been dropped in a city or smaller community, phone booth, sidewalk, or vendor's aisle.

Results

Of 420 letters distributed, 199 (47.4%) were mailed by the finder (the altruistic response). The effect of deviance altered return rates, with the percentage of mail returned in the B. J. Wilson, Dandee Wilson, Florida Prostitutes' Education Project, Supporters of Legalized Prostitution, and Coalition Advocating Safer Hustling conditions being 60.7%, 59.5%, 44.0%, 31.0%, and 41.7%, respectively [$\chi^2(N=420)=21.53, p<.001$]. The effect of location and deviance on altruistic responses from cities were generally greater except when the person in need of help was affiliated with the highly deviant conditions [$\chi^2(N=420)=24.92, p<.001$]. The return rates in each of the conditions are depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF LOCATION AND DEVIANCE OF ADDRESSEE

Condition (Addressee)	City		Town		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
B. J. Wilson (Control)	25	59.5	26	61.9	51	60.7
Dandee Wilson	30	71.4	20	47.6	50	59.5
Prostitute Education	14	33.3	23	54.8	37	44.0
Legalized Prostitution	10	23.8	16	38.1	26	31.0
Safer Hustling	20	47.6	15	35.7	35	41.7
Total	99	47.1	100	47.6	199	47.4

Unexpectedly, there was greater variance across addressee conditions in the number and percentage of letters returned in the cities than from the smaller urban communities. It was expected that the data from the city would indicate generally less helpfulness; however, even the highly deviant Supporters of Legalized Prostitution affiliation garnered a 23.8% return. Urban persons, compared to smaller urban community residents, appeared more strongly affected by the stimulus characteristics of the person needing help, as they returned fewer letters for two of the three highly deviant addressees. Only the Coalition Advocating Safer Hustling condition had a higher rate of mail returned. Conversely, small community residents returned 54 letters to the three highly deviant addresses compared to 44 for urban finders. Small urban community residents also found and returned more mail to the Florida Prostitutes' Education Project addressee than did urban residents. Further, the small community resident return rate for the Florida Prostitutes' Education Project condition was nonsignificantly lower than that of the control and higher than that for the somewhat deviant Dandee Wilson.

The over-all return rate from cities was one letter less than the return rate seen for the smaller urban communities. The Dandee condition produced the expected decrease in returned mail from the small communities but not in the cities. For urban residents, the stimulus characteristics of the somewhat deviant Dandee condition and the deviant Florida Prostitutes' Education Project and Supporters of Legalized Prostitution conditions were ostensibly different enough to produce a dramatic decrease in altruistic behavior in the latter two conditions.

STUDY B: NEEDLES

A new social deviant addressee was added to Hansson and Slade's (1977) original design that employed control, somewhat deviant, and highly deviant addressee groups. In addition, all addressees were renamed T. J. Williams, except for Dandee Williams in care of the original Pink Panther Lounge. Thus, we employed as manipulations of deviancy-nondeviancy

whether T. J. Williams was affiliated with the "Communist Party" or "Supporters of Legalized Needle and Syringe Exchange." Recently, researchers from the University of California at Berkeley and San Francisco collected U.S. public opinion poll data that indicated about half of the general public surveyed support efforts at reduction of harm, including legalization of needle sales, exchange, and distribution (Lurie, Reingold, & Bowser, 1993). We are hypothesizing that even though the affiliation with legalized needle exchange has evoked only evenly mixed, nonpolarizing public reaction, that it will still serve as an appropriate manipulation of social deviancy and as a valid measure of public opinion.

Procedure

A total of 408 stamped letters were dropped in Palm Beach County, Florida; 204 envelopes in 41 cities and suburban areas (population $M=20,182$) and 204 in five smaller towns (population $M=7,213$). Stamped envelopes were dropped in equal numbers in the aisles of stores, on sidewalks next to major thoroughfares, and in or around phone booths in both the cities and smaller towns. A coded note was enclosed in each envelope to show whether it had been dropped in a city or smaller town, phone booth, sidewalk, or vendor's aisle.

Results

Of 408 letters distributed, 180 (44.1%) were mailed by the finders (the altruistic response). Deviance did affect return rates, with the percentage of mail returned in the control, Dandee, Communist, and needle-exchange conditions being 48%, 43.1%, 32.4%, and 52.9%, respectively [$\chi^2(N=408)=9.62, p<.03$]. The effect of location and deviance on altruistic responses from cities was generally less than that in small towns, even when the person in need of help was affiliated with the highly deviant conditions [$\chi^2(N=408)=8.29, p<.05$]. The return rates for each of the conditions are depicted in Table 2.

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF LOCATION AND DEVIANCE OF ADDRESSEE

Condition (Addressee)	City		Town		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
T. J. Williams (Control)	26	51.0	23	45.1	49	48.0
Dandee Williams	19	37.3	25	49.0	44	43.1
Communist Party	14	27.5	19	37.3	33	32.4
Needle Exchange	26	51.0	28	54.9	54	52.9
Total	85	41.7	95	46.6	180	44.1

DISCUSSION

Both community size and the interaction of size and the deviance status

of the person in need of help affected altruism as measured. Both studies found generally more altruism in the smaller urban communities and towns than cities. This finding seems to be at least partially supported by others (Schneider & Mockus, 1974; Milgram, 1970) who reported that rural residents were more helpful than their urban neighbors. Other researchers have found altruism not affected by a community's size at all (Korte, 1975; Lesk & Zippel, 1975). Altruism in our smaller urban communities and towns was generally less variable and affected less by the social deviance of the needy addressee. Altruism in cities, on the other hand, while being generally lower, was more variable and strongly affected by social deviance. These findings are not supportive of Milgram's theory (1970) that urban residents have adapted to increased cognitive and environmental demands with generalized indifference toward nonsignificant others and are less likely to make fine distinctions between them. That cities are less, not more, tolerant of individual differences and nonconformity compared to smaller towns (and smaller urban communities) seems in contradiction to Hansson and Slade (1977) and Whitehead and Metzger (1981), using different manipulations of deviancy-nondeviancy. They reported cities to have a generally greater tolerance for nonconformity and thus a greater sense of community and social responsibility compared to small towns.

These data seem to support the notion that urban residents were more emotionally responsive to those different from themselves and consequently were less tolerant of deviance. Although city dwellers in Study A generally appeared to be more socially responsible to the control and the somewhat deviant Dandee than small urban community residents, they also were less helpful if the person needing help was socially different. Perhaps, among Study A's residents of small communities, one reason for the higher return rate for the Florida Prostitutes' Education Project than for the other two socially deviant conditions might be attributed to some socially or morally redeeming connotation suggested by the words "education project." Similarly, some small urban community letter finders in Study A may not have known what "hustling" meant, perhaps affecting the return response.

The present findings appear to show that an increase in living density does seem to be associated with an over-all decrease in helping behavior, a negative overgeneralization sometimes attributed to city dwellers. Finally, the data suggest that further field trials are needed for comparisons of social behavior in geographic settings varying in population density, and especially using different manipulations of deviancy-nondeviancy.

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