

Y2K AFFILIATION, IMMEDIATE PEDESTRIAN DENSITY, AND HELPING RESPONSES TO LOST LETTERS¹

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Summary.—Of 75 letters “lost” in Florida, 41 were returned in the mail (the helpful response). Immediate pedestrian density was significantly related to nonhelping responses. The greater the number of subjects passing by a lost letter, the less likely any one of them would respond to it. The rates of return did vary with the addressees’ affiliations. Returned responses for the affiliates, Y2K Arkbuilders and the Believers of God’s Judgement Against Homosexuals: Y2K Millennium Bug, were substantially lower than for the affiliate, Y2K Computer Repair & Programming, Inc. Returns for the Believers of God’s Judgement Against Homosexuals: Y2K Millennium Bug affiliate were significantly lower than for the Y2K Arkbuilders affiliate. Variables such as sex, race, and estimated age of subjects were not associated with helping to return a lost letter. The rate of return of lost letters is not the only important measure to be examined in studies using lost letters.

Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) developed the lost-letter technique to measure helping behavior, using as a dependent variable passersby’s willingness to pick up and mail lost but stamped and addressed letters. With this technique, letters were addressed to fictitious persons considered to differ in evident conformity to conventional social norms. The technique was not centered upon individuals’ reactions to lost letters but rather upon the rate of return for a particular organization relative to that for a control group. Their results did not reveal anything unusual or new in that it was not a surprise that extremist political groups were helped less than a medical research one. However, the technique did help with the problem of interviewer bias in survey research. Not many field studies have measured situational or setting characteristics such as the number of pedestrians (volume) or sidewalk density in friendliness and helping behavior (Johnson & Powell, 1975; Korte, Ypma, & Toppen, 1975; Iwata, 1977; Newman & McCauley, 1977; Schwartz & Ames, 1977; Kammann, Thomson, & Irwin, 1979; Amato, 1980, 1983). Even fewer of these studies have done so when the helping act was picking up and returning in the mail a lost letter (Johnson & Powell, 1975; Schwartz & Ames, 1977; Kammann, *et al.*, 1979). One (Johnson &

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Powell, 1975) varied the addressees' affiliations on the lost letters. Milgram, *et al.* reported that "the lost-letter technique has many limitations, among them, a relative lack of control over the precise processes that mediate the return of the letters: one knows only the rate of response for any particular letter series" (p. 438).

Lantane and Darley (1970) proposed a social inhibition model that emphasized the situational aspects of urban life. These researchers argued that the presence of large numbers of other people can inhibit helping behavior (like picking up and returning a lost letter) by creating a state of "pluralistic ignorance" in which no one wants to be the first to act, or there is a general "diffusion of responsibility" in which no single person feels a strong obligation to be the one to help another in need. Therefore, the first purpose was to assess whether immediate pedestrian density influenced nonhelping responses. Secondly, we sought to assess, during the week preceding the turn of the century, whether the use of three fictitious Y2K groups with different goals was associated with returned responses. Thirdly, we sought to examine whether variables such as sex, race, and estimated age of subjects were related.

The present experiment modified the design of Johnson and Powell (1975) by adding new affiliations for addressees and substituting, using the methods of Kammann, *et al.* (1979), immediate pedestrian density for percent of passersby who ignored or made nonhelping responses for percent who respond but do not pick up the letter. The control addressee's affiliation was renamed Y2K Computer Repair & Programming, Inc.; the affiliations of other addressees were changed to Believers of God's Judgement Against Homosexuals: Y2K Millennium Bug and Y2K Arkbuilders. The content of the letters indicated that a \$250 contribution was available if someone from one of the respective groups would drop by and pick it up. 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. All envelopes were addressed in care of one of the researchers who lived in Pensacola.

A total of 75 lost letters (25 letters per three affiliations for addressees) were distributed in equal numbers on busy sidewalks and heavily traveled walkways inside and outside malls, restaurants, grocery stores, and other retail business establishments, and on top of pay telephones, automatic bank teller machines, and stores' shelves in these locations in Pensacola, Florida, a gulf coast city of 60,600 in Escambia County. Every passerby who walked within six feet of a letter, placed stamp-side up, became a subject. This distance was closer than that used by others for measuring helping and physical responses, e.g., eye contact, between passersby and experimenters (Korte, *et*

al., 1975; Newman & McCauley, 1977; Amato, 1980, 1983). Each of the 75 lost letters was systematically observed until taken away, and the data collected were (a) the number of subjects passing close by a lost letter without giving any indication of noticing it as a measure of immediate pedestrian density, (b) the number of subjects passing by a lost letter who gave an indication of noticing it but who did *not* take it away with them as a measure of a nonhelping response, (c) the race, sex, and estimated age of each passerby who did pick up a lost letter and took it away possibly to return it in the mail and (d) the rates of returned responses across kinds of addresses as a measure of a helping response. A reliability test on 20 cases indicated that two independent observers showed high consistency about the appropriate category for describing the subjects' responses ($r = .92$). The letters were distributed between December 23 and 28, 1999.

All 75 letters were taken, but only 41 (54.7%) were returned in the mail by the finders. The rank-order correlation between the immediate pedestrian density and the number of nonhelpful passersby produced was .53 ($N = 75$, $p < .001$). Thus, the more subjects passing by a lost letter, the less likely any one of them would respond to it. The percentage of mail returned in the Y2K Computer Repair & Programming, Inc., Y2K Arkbuilders, and Believers of God's Judgement Against Homosexuals: Y2K Millennium Bug conditions was 88%, 56%, and 20%, respectively. The rates of return did vary with the addressees' affiliations. The rates of return for both the Y2K Arkbuilders and the Believers of God's Judgement Against Homosexuals: Y2K Millennium Bug affiliates were substantially lower than for the Y2K Computer Repair & Programming, Inc. ($z = 2.21$, $p = .03$; $z = 4.54$, $p = .001$, respectively). Similarly, the return responses for the Believers of God's Judgement Against Homosexuals: Y2K Millennium Bug affiliate were significantly lower than those for the Y2K Arkbuilders affiliate ($z = 2.33$, $p = .02$). Of the 35 letters taken away by men and 40 letters taken away by women, 20 letters (57.1%) and 21 letters (52.5%), respectively, were returned in the mail. Of the 61 letters taken away by white persons and 14 letters taken away by non-white persons, 34 letters (55.7%) and 7 letters (50%), respectively, were returned in the mail. Thus, neither the sex nor the race of the letter retrievers were associated with returned responses [$\chi^2(N = 75) = .03$, ns, $\phi = .07$, $d = .02$] and [$\chi^2(N = 75) = .01$, ns, $\phi = .07$, $d = .01$], respectively. To assess the relevance of age, the estimated ages of subjects were divided into four levels: 24 yr. or less, 25 through 39 yr., 40 through 59 yr., and 60 or more. Estimated age was not associated with helping to return a lost letter. The rates of return for each of the conditions are depicted in Table 1.

These present data support Lantane and Darley's social inhibition model (1970) in that the higher rate of nonhelping was related to the greater immediate pedestrian density in Pensacola. Perhaps in our test situation it

TABLE 1
DENSITY AND NONHELPING AND RETURNED RESPONSES BY Y2K
AFFILIATION OF LETTER: FREQUENCIES AND PERCENT

Condition (Addressee)	Immediate	Nonhelping	Helping Response (Returns)	
	Pedestrian Density*, <i>n</i>	Response*, <i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%
Y2K Control	372	105	22	88.0
Y2K Arkbuilders	285	139	14	56.0
Y2K (is) God's Judgement Against Homosexuals	330	127	5	20.0
Total	987	371	41	54.7

*Within 6 feet of a letter.

was possible to diffuse responsibility onto other urban passersby, so it was less likely that some would help pick up and return a lost letter. The rate of return of lost letters was higher (54.7%) than expected. This was consistent with Waugh, Plake, and Rienzi (2000) who reported higher response rates for a single urban community using a gay marriage and a control addressee. The present findings contrast with the low response rates reported by Bridges (1996) and by Levinson, Pesina, and Rienzi (1993) for one size of community (a county) and by Bridges and Rodriguez (2000) using two sizes of community. It also agrees with our other work (Bridges, 1996; Bridges, Welsh, Graves, & Sonn, 1997), using different homosexual and deviant addressee affiliations. Johnson and Powell (1975) suggested looking at more than just the rates of return in lost-letter studies. Bridges and Clark (2000) did that but found no differences or associations of sex or race of letter finders whether they took into account the "Take but not return" measure or not. Like this latter study, our results were similar for sex and race but differed from those of Amato (1983) for the estimated ages of pedestrian subjects.

The rate of return of lost letters is not the only measure to be examined in lost-letter studies. One potential advantage of directly observing the processes that mediate the return of lost letters in the field, as in the present study, is to allow the researcher the possibility of adjusting for letters blown off the beaten path by the wind or those picked up by children, illiterates, and street cleaners. As sources of unwanted variance, these letters could easily be eliminated later were they precoded before distribution in the field. A researcher might gain greater confidence in data while perhaps choosing to distribute fewer letters overall.

One present limitation was that our analysis was complicated by the equivocalness of the nonhelping response measure, i.e., subjects passing by a lost letter who do give an indication of noticing it but who do *not* take it away with them. Since the letter was positioned in such a way as to make

not noticing it somewhat unlikely, it is possible that some number of the "not noticed" passersby (immediate pedestrian density) had actually noticed the lost letter. In conclusion, we suggest further research might examine the frequency of those individuals who more overtly respond to lost letters by changing their body positions to look definitively at the letters or actually picking them up before replacing or putting them back somewhere else nearby.

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Accepted July 10, 2001.