

## EXTENSIONS OF THE LOST LETTER TECHNIQUE TO DIVISIVE ISSUES OF CREATIONISM, DARWINISM, SEX EDUCATION, AND GAY AND LESBIAN AFFILIATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—Two field studies using 1,004 “lost letters” were designed to test the hypotheses that returned responses would be greater in small towns than from a city, that addressees’ affiliation with a group either (1) opposed to physical education in schools, (2) supporting gay and lesbian teachers, or (3) advocating Creationism or Darwinism would reduce the return rate. Of 504 letters “lost” in Study A, 163 (32.3%) were returned in the mail from residents of southeast Louisiana and indicated across 3 addressees and 2 sizes of community, addressees’ affiliations were not associated with returned responses. Community size and addressees’ affiliations were associated with significantly different rates of return in the city. Return rates from sites within a city were lower when letters were addressed to an organization which opposed (teaching) health education in the schools than to one supporting daily health education. Of 500 letters “lost” in Study B, 95 (19.0%) were returned from residents of northwest Florida and indicated across 5 addressees and 2 sizes of community, addressees’ affiliations were significantly associated with returned responses overall (5 addressees) and in small towns (control, Creationism, Darwinism addressees), but not with community size. Community size and addressees’ affiliations were associated with significantly different rates of return in small towns, with returns greater than or equal to those in the city (except for the addressee advocating teaching Darwinism in public schools). The present findings appear to show that applications of the lost letter technique to other divisive social issues are useful in assessing public opinion.

The willingness of Americans to extend civil liberties to any number of unpopular groups has interested social scientists for many years. Hunter (1987) wrote about the ever-increasing cultural polarization of American society since the mid-1970s. For about 50 years, the research has shown Southerners to be more reluctant than nonsoutherners to extend civil liberties to various unpopular groups (Stouffer, 1955; Middleton, 1976; Abrahamson & Carter, 1986; Wilson, 1986; Tuch, 1987; Ellison & Musick, 1993). Low tolerance, i.e., the lack of willingness to extend civil liberties to deviant groups, continues in the south due in part to Protestant fundamentalism (El-

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Ellison & Musick, 1993; Borg, 1997). Ellison and Musick (1993) cited a study by Nunn, Crockett, and Williams (1978) and indicated the south, as a regional subculture, was characterized as "Localism, defined as a marked preference for and identity with the locale of one's birth, is joined in the South with an insularity of mind that is slow to change, actively belligerent toward the new, and openly intolerant toward a diversity of viewpoints" (p. 380). Surveys of public opinion in the 1980s showed widespread fear of AIDS, with much inaccurate information about how the disease is spread and a public willingness to support extreme policies that would restrict civil liberties for the purpose of battling the disease (Herek, 1999). Herek also defined AIDS-related stigma as "prejudice, discounting, discrediting, and discrimination directed at people perceived to have AIDS or HIV, and the individuals, groups, and communities with which they are associated" (p. 1103). Historically in America, symbolic AIDS stigma has focused primarily on male homosexuality, which allows equating having AIDS with this sexual orientation (Herek, 1999; Herek & Capitanio, 1999).

The "lost letter technique" offers several advantages to those wishing an unobtrusive survey of public opinion. As an example, when persons are asked to participate in interviews or to complete surveys they recognize that they have been selected for questioning and that their responses will be studied. Participants' concern about evaluation can strongly affect what they say. Interviews and survey questionnaires are examples of obtrusive measurement devices, but Himes and Mason (1974) quoted a study noting "they also intrude as a foreign element into the social setting they would describe, they create as well as measure attitudes, they elicit typical roles and responses, they are limited to those who are accessible and will cooperate, and responses obtained are produced in part by dimensions of individual differences irrelevant to the topic at hand" (p. 1). These problems can be acute in research regarding socially and politically sensitive issues.

The lost letter technique was developed as another way to measure public opinion toward political groups and other institutions (Milgram, Mann, & Harter, 1965). These investigators utilized a large number of stamped envelopes addressed to different fictitious organizations and dispersed in various public places. Passersby could either ignore a seemingly lost letter, respond but not take it, or pick it up and take it for possible return in the mail. Thus, passersby had a chance to act on objects with social and political attributes, i.e., addressees on lost letters. Milgram, *et al.* (1965) hypothesized that the passerby who found a lost letter may have been more inclined to return it when his attitude was consonant with that suggested by the addressee. However, according to Georgoff, Hersker, and Murdick (1972) "... an unknown is the number of 'finders' electing to return cards (lost letters) who may have formed no opinions with regard to the issue (represented by

the addressee), or are able to surmount their biases and have returned the cards (letters) out of a sense of fairness or felt obligation" (p. 118). Conversely, a letter finder who held an attitude opposed to the position suggested by the addressee would have been more inclined to ignore, destroy, or open the letter. Thus, each passerby defined their relationship toward an organization(s) by their action(s). From his use of political groups and other institutions in research, Milgram (1969a) concluded that "the focus of the technique is not on the individual reaction to the lost letters but, rather, on the rate of response for a particular organization relative to other organizations that serve as controls." Finally Milgram (1970) hypothesized that in cities people help others less often than those in small towns.

Additional research is needed to help establish Milgram's lost letter technique as a research tool for sampling public opinion, to specify precise limitations and applicability. There are some apparent weaknesses, even though the technique has been reported to be an accurate measure of community attitudes toward political organizations and other groups (Bridges, Williamson, & Scheibe, 1998; Bridges, Ryan, & Scheibe, 2000; Bridges, Keeton, & Clark, 2002; Bridges, Williamson, Thompson, & Windsor, 2001). For example, from his use of political candidates in research, Milgram (1969a) concluded that "the lost letter technique is not very useful with subtle issues, or in connection with issues that do not arouse very strong feelings. It only works for issues in which there is a clear-cut polarization and which arouse a high level of emotional involvement" (p. 264). Georgoff, *et al.* (1972) referred to one weakness of Milgram's technique as having to do with "the crudity of the stimulus (addressee) and its method of measurement" (p. 114). Milgram (1969b) suggested that the rates of return of lost letters may vary as a function of the divisiveness of the groups being sampled. That is, the most strongly polarized the political candidates, the stronger the differences in responsiveness. Reports of U.S. public opinion data indicate a "highly polarized distribution of responses" toward teaching about homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle in the public schools (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998). A 1996 survey conducted by Gallup Polls for *Phi Delta Kappa* reported that (1) by a 2-1 margin the public rejects teaching about homosexuality in the public schools, (2) fewer than one in 10 would want it to be taught as an acceptable alternative lifestyle, and (3) the public also opposes allowing gay and lesbian clubs to organize as part of a school's extracurricular program (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1996). A recent study in Pensacola, Florida using letters addressed to Committees to Support and Oppose "Gay-Friendly" Beer Ads and a control garnered a few returned responses (17.9%) indicating some homosexual intolerance. Based upon these findings, we believe that having gay and lesbian teachers in the schools, albeit a different topic than above, would still engender a highly polarized response from the public.

Unlike the public debate on teaching about homosexuality which often seems highly polarized, as some are fervently for and some against, teaching about health and sex education in public schools seems to be less polarizing as inferred from the mostly positive responses. As an example of the latter, polls taken in Alabama reported that greater than 96% of residents were in favor of having health education taught in the schools and in Georgia 89% of residents thought public schools should offer comprehensive health education, including sex education (Georgia Fall Poll, 1987, Archival Study Number NNSP-GA-011, Public Opinion Poll Question 29. [Electronic database] Chapel Hill, NC: The Univer. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Institute for Research in Social Science (Producer and Distributor); Capstone Poll Omnibus Survey, 1990 & 1992, Archival Study Number NNSP-AL-019 and NNSP-AL-020, Public Opinion Poll Question 63. [Electronic database] Chapel Hill, NC: The Univer. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Institute for Research in Social Science (Producer and Distributor).

We have attempted to expand the limits and applicability of the lost letter technique as a tool for inferring public opinion about both noncontroversial and controversial social issues. This is important because the technique, in conjunction with significance testing to establish nonequivalence between treatments (Dunnett & Gent, 1977, 1996), offers a promising approach to more crude and unobtrusive means of assessing public attitudes especially about divisive social issues. Unlike previous studies, our addressees' affiliations representing social issues were all either relatively noncontroversial (includes controls) or relatively controversial (includes controls). First, we chose a political social issue on which public opinion appeared to be skewed in its distribution, i.e., unipolar, to assess whether the use of addressees' affiliations, representing a less emotionally charged social issue, i.e., opposition to daily health education, affected returned responses. Second, we chose Support and Oppose Gay and Lesbian Teacher campaigns as a social issue because these may be considered political organizations. It can be hypothesized that, even several years after these public opinion polls were taken, public reaction would still be strong enough that an addressee for support of gay and lesbian teachers would still elicit different rates of return for public attitudes. Third, we hypothesized that the use of addressees' affiliations indicating they were for teaching Sex Education and Creationism or Darwinism in public schools would be reflected in return of responses. Fourth, we hypothesized that the community size in which the letters are placed will influence return of lost letters, i.e., residents of cities will be less helpful than those from small towns. Finally, we hypothesized that overall rates of return will be low because there are overall relatively fewer responses for those letters addressed to Support and Oppose Gay and Lesbian Teacher campaigns than other addressees' affiliations.

## METHOD

Studies A and B modified and extended the previous work (Bridges & Coady, 1996; Bridges, Ryan, & Scheibe, 2000) by adding both new affiliations for addressees and cities and towns for community size. For Study A, the three affiliations of addressees were renamed PTA of Tangipahoa Parish (noncontroversial control condition), Committee to Support Daily Health Education in the Schools, and Committee to Oppose Daily Health Education in the Schools. For Study B, the addressees' affiliations were either Florida Advocates for Teaching Sex Education in Public Schools (controversial control condition), Florida Advocates for Teaching Creationism in Public Schools, Florida Advocates for Teaching Darwinism in Public Schools, Florida Campaign Opposed to Gay & Lesbian Teachers, or Florida Campaign Supporting Gay & Lesbian Teachers. These fictitious and somewhat political organizations had different or conflicting goals.

*Distribution*

In Study A, a total of 504 lost letters, i.e., 84 letters for each of three affiliations for addressees in two sizes of community were distributed in Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana: 252 within the city limits of Hammond (16,617 population) and 252 in each of six small towns and villages (608–4,365 population) in Tangipahoa Parish (96,983 population). In Study A, all envelopes were addressed to a post office box in Pensacola, Florida, and no return addresses were used. This was done because we wished to avoid any possibility of interference with our mail delivery, as we had previously encountered using a rental box at a smaller post office box.

In Study B, a total of 500 stamped letters (50 letters per five addressee affiliations in two sizes of community) were dropped in 11 north Florida counties over a period of several months: 250 envelopes in a city, i.e., Tallahassee, and 250 in 20 small towns, e.g., De Funiak Springs, Bonifay, Chipley, and Marianna. Northern Florida is considered a part of the Southern "Bible Belt".

In both studies, stamped and sealed envelopes were distributed as the opportunity allowed, i.e., at or near driveways of residential dwellings, at the entrances and alcoves of retail businesses, on sidewalks of busy streets, around phone booths, in the aisles of and in front of retail stores inside, outside malls and strip-malls, and under vehicle windshield wipers. A handwritten "Post-it<sup>®</sup>" note with the message "found this letter near your car" was attached to the lost letters that were placed under windshield wipers. Similarly, a coded note was enclosed in each envelope as part of the letter in both studies to indicate the location of the letter drop. In addition, each envelope had a typed mailing address as did each letter's message (typed and signed by hand). Envelopes and letters varied as the addressees' affiliations

were manipulated in both studies. For a letter to appear legitimate and possibly be returned if opened by the finder, each one indicated that a \$250 contribution was available if someone from the named committee would come and pick it up.

#### RESULTS

Of the 504 letters distributed in Study A and the 500 in Study B, 163 (32.3%) and 95 (19.0%), respectively, were returned in the mail by the finders. In Studies A and B, community size was not associated with overall rates of return of letters [ $\chi^2(N=504)=1.17$  (ns, power = .21, effect size = .05) and  $\chi^2(N=500)=.21$  (ns, power = .09, effect size = .02), respectively].

In Study A, 15 of the 252 letters (~6.0%) distributed in small towns and villages were picked up by postal route carriers and ultimately returned in the mail to the post office box in Pensacola, Florida by one of the Louisiana postmasters. We know this because we received a letter stating such from the Hammond postmaster along with 15 of our letters. He informed us that one of his letter carriers had found the following number and type of letters on his delivery route: five for the Committee to Support Health Education, four for the Committee to Oppose Health Education, and four for the PTA Control. The rates of return for each of the addressees' affiliations are given in Tables 1 (Study A) and 2 (Study B).

TABLE 1  
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF  
AFFILIATION OF ADDRESSEE AND LOCATION: STUDY A

| Condition<br>(Addressee) | City     |      | Town     |      | Total    |      |
|--------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
|                          | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    |
| PTA (Control)            | 30       | 35.7 | 24       | 28.6 | 54       | 32.1 |
| Health Education         |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| Support                  | 37       | 44.0 | 26       | 31.0 | 63       | 37.5 |
| Oppose                   | 21       | 25.0 | 25       | 29.8 | 46       | 27.4 |
| Total                    | 88       | 34.9 | 75       | 42.4 | 163      | 32.3 |

In Study B, but not Study A, all five addressees' affiliations were significantly associated with overall rates of return of letters [ $\chi_4^2(N=500)=36.78$ ,  $p < .001$ , power = 1.0, effect size = .26]. The rates of return were the lowest (7.0% vs 27.0%) for the affiliates Oppose and Support Gay and Lesbian Teachers compared to those for Sex Education Control, Creationism, and Darwinism. In Study B, the affiliates, Sex Education Control vs Creationism vs Darwinism, were *not* associated with different rates of return [ $\chi_2^2(N=300)=3.96$ , ns, power = .40, effect size = .12]. However, the affiliates, Sex Education Control vs Oppose vs Support Gay and Lesbian Teachers, were significantly associated with rates of return [ $\chi_2^2(N=300)=26.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,

power = .99, effect size = .30]. The lowest rates of return occurred for the affiliates, Oppose Gay and Lesbian Teachers (5%) and Support Gay and Lesbian Teachers (9%), in comparison with Sex Education Control (29.0%).

TABLE 2  
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION OF  
AFFILIATION OF ADDRESSEE AND LOCATION STUDY B

| Condition<br>(Addressee) | City     |      | Town     |      | Total    |      |
|--------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
|                          | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    |
| Sex Education (Control)  | 12       | 24.0 | 17       | 34.0 | 29       | 29.0 |
| Creationism              | 15       | 30.0 | 16       | 32.0 | 32*      | 32.0 |
| Darwinism                | 14       | 28.0 | 6        | 12.0 | 20       | 20.0 |
| Gay Teachers             |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| Oppose                   | 4        | 8.0  | 1        | 2.0  | 5        | 5.0  |
| Support                  | 4        | 8.0  | 5        | 10.0 | 9        | 9.0  |
| Total                    | 49       | 19.6 | 45       | 18.0 | 95       | 19.0 |

\*One letter without original coded envelope so community size is unknown.

Community size and addressees' affiliations were significantly associated with rates of return in the cities for Study A [ $\chi_2^2(N=252)=6.74, p < .04$ , power = .63 effect size = .16] and in the small towns for Study B using the affiliates, Sex Education Control vs Creationism vs Darwinism [ $\chi_2^2(N=150)=7.69, p < .03$ , power = .70, effect size = .23]. More specifically, for the city in Study A, the rates of return were lowest for the affiliate, Oppose Health Education, in comparison to the affiliates of Support Health Education and PTA Control (25.0% vs 44.0% vs 35.7%). For the small towns in Study B, the rates of return were lowest for the affiliate, Darwinism, in comparison to those for Sex Education and Creationism (12.0% vs 34.0% vs 32.0%). Affiliates of Oppose and Support Gay and Lesbian Teachers were not associated with different rates of return in either the city or small towns on a Fisher's Exact test.

#### DISCUSSION

It was expected that for smaller communities, there would be a larger rate of returned letters; however, although returned responses from the cities in both studies were higher than those of the small towns, the difference was not statistically significant. The present findings for Study A showing more returned responses from the city than the small towns and villages are consistent with Bridges, Ryan, and Scheibe (2000) who worked in cities and smaller rural communities (instead of small towns and villages) in a north-west Florida county. Lastly, our finding that community size in both studies was not associated with different rates of return is consistent with those of Bridges, Ryan, and Scheibe (2000) but inconsistent with those of other stud-

ies (Bridges, Williamson, & Scheibe, 1998; Bridges, Thompson, & Willers, 2000) and not consistent with Milgram's hypothesis (1970) that residents of small towns help others significantly more often than residents in cities.

In Study B, the overall rate of returned responses of lost letters was low (19%) when data from the city and small towns were combined. This low response rate, using different affiliations for homosexual and deviant addressees was consistent with some in Florida reported by Bridges and Rodriguez (2000), Bridges, Welsh, Graves, and Sonn (Study B-1997), and Levinson, Pesina, and Rienzi (1993), using different sizes of community (a city, cities and suburbs, and a county, respectively). In contrast, others using gay and control addressees' affiliations have reported higher returned responses from cities, suburbs, and towns in south Florida, a single urban community in California, and a seaside community located in northwest Florida's Bible Belt (Bridges, 1996; Waugh, Plake, & Rienzi, 2000; Bridges, Williamson, & Jarvis, 2001, respectively).

As expected in Study A, across kinds of addressees, some affiliations showed greater variation in number of returned responses than others. The present findings are inconsistent with other studies using very similar addressees' affiliations such as the Committee to Support/Oppose Daily Physical Education in the Schools (Bridges, Ryan, & Scheibe, 2000). According to Sears' second hypothesis (1983) and other previous studies, lesser "perceived similarity" to the affiliate, Committee to Oppose Daily Health Education in the Schools, 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). In Study B, it was expected that the returned responses from the city and from the small towns for the affiliate, Support Gay and Lesbian Teacher(s), would be considerably less than that for the other affiliates; however, returned responses for both homosexual, i.e., Support and Oppose, affiliates in the city and small towns, as well as the Darwinism affiliate in the small towns only were considerably less than that for the other affiliates. As such, our attitudinal data have supported the basic premise of Milgram, *et al.*'s lost letter technique, namely, that the probability of lost letters being returned depends on the social and political attributes of the addressees' affiliations.

Milgram (1969a) concluded that "the focus of the technique is not on the individual reaction to the lost letters but, rather, on the rate of response for a particular organization relative to other organizations that serve as controls" (p. 437). However, trying to come up with suitable control conditions for Studies A and B, i.e., PTA of Tangipahoa Parish and Florida Advocates for Teaching Sex Education in Public Schools, respectively, was a difficult task. Hence, we felt it was crucial to apply a technique to rule out equivalence of treatments (especially among control vs other addressees' af-



filiations) conditional upon information from our earlier study (Bridges & Rodriguez, 2000). We were assured by using our data in the form of  $2 \times 2$  contingency tables that relative to our control addressee (for 6/9 comparisons), changes in the treatment, i.e., addressees' affiliations on a one-tail test, significantly affected experimental rates of return (Dunnnett & Gent, 1977, 1996). That is, we were able to establish *nonequivalence* of treatments for most of our experimental outcomes in both studies. More specifically, for nine of our relevant  $2 \times 2$  comparisons, i.e., those relative to the control and those comparisons made just between addressees with different or conflicting goals, the rates of return were *not* equivalent in all but three of our comparisons. In Study A, only the comparison of PTA Control vs Oppose Health Education was statistically established as equivalent. In Study B, only the comparisons for Sex Education Control vs Creationism and Oppose vs Support Gay and Lesbian Teachers were established as equivalent. Therefore, *equivalence of treatments contributed less in most comparisons*. The present findings appear to show that our applications of the lost letter technique to various divisive social issues suggest its usefulness in assessing public opinion.

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*Accepted January 3, 2002.*