

ATTITUDE ASSESSMENT BY THE LOST-LETTER TECHNIQUE

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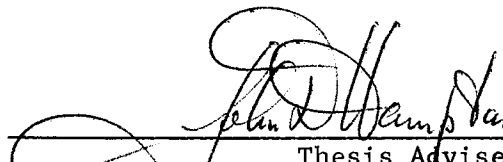
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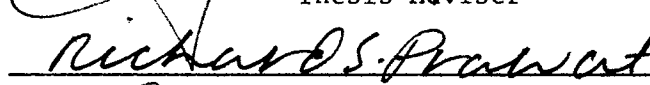
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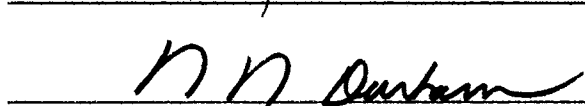
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PREFACE

This study is concerned with the assessment of attitudes by an unobtrusive measure, the lost-letter technique. The primary objective is to determine if lost letters with positive and negative addresses will be returned at significantly different rates. Also investigated are the attitudes of Oklahoma residents toward penal reform and the legalization of marijuana.

The author wishes to express his appreciation to his major adviser, Dr. John David Hampton, for his thoughtful assistance during the past several years. Appreciation is also expressed to the other committee members, Dr. Richard Prawat and Dr. Carl Anderson, for their assistance.

A special note of thanks is given to my mother, Mrs. Vee Whiteley, for her aid not only in typing this thesis, but also for her help and encouragement throughout my life.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Researchers in the social sciences have recognized the fact that conventional methods of attitude assessment sometimes contaminate the responses given by subjects. The two most popular methods of attitude assessment, the survey interview and the questionnaire, introduce foreign elements into a situation that they attempt to measure. The presence of an experimenter or interviewer sometimes makes a difference in a subject's responses (Rosenthal, 1966). Indeed, De Fleur and Westle (1958) report that a persons' verbal behavior may not be related to overt action situations.

As one possible solution to the problem of experimenter effects and other extraneous effects that may contaminate responses when using conventional attitude gathering devices, researchers such as Webb (1966) have recommended the development and use of unobtrusive measures in the social sciences. Unobtrusive measures offer the advantage of subject non-awareness. Even if unobtrusive measures cannot equal the precision of conventional techniques they can help curb or measure the individual biases of other techniques (Summers, 1970).

The lost-letter technique is an unobtrusive measure offering the advantage of indirect attitude assessment. Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) devised the technique for use in obtaining a quantitative measure of an attitude in a population. Basically, the lost-letter technique

consists of selectively "losing" a large number of stamped, addressed, and unposted letters. By comparison of the return rate of address categories an estimate of community opinion may be made.

The Problem

The major question of the current investigation deals with the study of Milgram, et al. (1965), in which an organization with positive social connotations received more returned lost letters than did an organization with negative social connotations. Does the lost-letter technique discriminate sufficiently to register significant differences between organizations with positively and negatively perceived social roles?

A second question will also be investigated. Is penal reform regarded as a positive social issue in Oklahoma?

Also, the current investigation will attempt to assess feeling toward the legalization of marijuana. Is the legalization of marijuana perceived as being a negative social issue?

Theoretical Background

There seems to be a widespread belief that one should mail a lost stamped and addressed letter (Milgram, 1969a). An item on the Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale (Weschler, 1955) is based on the general knowledge that the proper way of dealing with such a lost letter is to mail it. The basic premise of the technique is that while most people will mail a lost stamped and addressed letter if the letter is addressed to a private citizen, they may not mail the letter if it is addressed to an organization they oppose. By mailing the letter one aids the addressee, or by not mailing the letter the addressee is hindered.

Theoretical Framework

By comparison of the number of returned letters in address categories, it is possible to obtain a rough estimate of community opinion (Georgoff, Hersker, and Murdick, 1972). The primary focus of the technique is on the rate of response for an organization as compared to other addresses that serve as controls. Milgram (1969) reports that the issues or organizations being investigated must arouse strong feelings and emotional involvement for the technique to be successful.

Limitations and Assumptions

Unobtrusive measures such as the lost-letter technique sometimes sacrifice experiment rigor in order to obtain more representative results. An awareness of the limitations of the lost-letter technique must be achieved if proper interpretations of results is the desired goal.

One source of unwanted variance is the difficulty or impossibility of specifying the sample obtained (Milgram, 1969a; Wicker, 1969). If the lost letters are distributed by a random scattering, children, illiterates, and other undesired persons may mail the letters. Placing the letters under the windshield wipers gives two advantages over random scattering. First, the letter will likely be found and disposed of by an adult. Secondly, by using license plates, parking decals, and other identifying marks on vehicles, it becomes possible to make gross assumptions about the sample populations identity.

A second limitation is directly related to the large amount of undesired variance produced by the technique. A large sample is required

to offset extraneous variance. Typically, samples used in the technique number at least 100 per cell. Unobtrusive distribution of such a large number of letters becomes difficult and the possibility of people recognizing the lost letters as part of an experiment is increased.

Milgram (1969b) has hypothesized that the difference in return of letters is always weaker than the actual extent of difference of opinions in the community. This may be due to several factors. Generally stated, the lack of control over the precise processes that mediate return of letters leads to questions concerning the diminution of actual community opinion. Such dilution of the strength of community opinion could be due in part to the fact that some people are moral enough to mail letters that they oppose. Also, the technique has a built in bias against middle positions and against positions that tend to lead to non-response (Georgoff, Hersker, and Murdick, 1972).

In summary, the lost-letter technique should not be used where sample survey or other conventional techniques are appropriate. The technique provides a rough estimate of opinion on preferences that are not evenly distributed in the population, and on positions that are dichotomous in nature (Shotland, Berger, and Forsythe, 1970). Some precision is sacrificed in order to obtain more representative responses.

CHAPTER II

SURVEY OF LITERATURE

The lost-letter technique seems to provide a rough estimate of community opinion on issues that may clearly be dichotomized. Milgram, et al. (1965) studies responses to positive and negative social organizations in New Haven, Connecticut. It was found that respondents returned 72% of letters addressed to Medical Research Associates and letters addressed to Friends of the Communist Party and Friends of the Nazi Party received return rates of 25%.

It is, therefore, hypothesized that in the current investigation there will be significantly more lost letters returned that are addressed to The Committee For Penal Reform than are letters addressed to The Committee For Legalization of Marijuana.

Organizations of a clearly positive social nature seem to receive percentage returns of lost letters that are significantly greater than the percentage returns of lost letters addressed to organizations of a negative social nature. Milgram (1969a) addressed letters to Medical Research Associates and lost them in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It was found that the letters addressed to Medical Research Associates were returned at a rate of 72% as compared to a 25% return of lost letters addressed to Friends of the Communist Party and Friends of the Nazi Party. The difference in return rates to letters addressed to positive and negative organizations was 47 percentage points.

Therefore, it is hypothesized that in the current investigation letters addressed to The Committee For Penal Reform will receive a return rate that is significantly greater than the return rate for lost letters addressed to The Committee For The Legalization of Marijuana.

When organizations are perceived negatively, they seem to receive significantly fewer returned lost letters than do positive organizations or private individuals. Georgoff, et al. (1972) found that postcards bearing the statement, "Marijuana (Pot) should be legalized," were returned by Miami, Florida, residents at a rate of 23.3%. Milgram, et al. (1965) also found that two negative addresses, Friends of the Nazi Party and Friends of the Communist Party, received return rates of 25%, respectively, in New Haven, Connecticut. It may be seen that in the cited studies negatively perceived organizations receive significantly fewer returned lost letters than would an address carrying the name of a private citizen.

Therefore, it is hypothesized that in the current investigation letters addressed to The Committee For The Legalization of Marijuana will be returned at a rate significantly less than will letters addressed to John Charles.

Summary of the three research questions to be examined in the current investigation may now be made. The first research question asks, will positive and negative addresses receive significantly different rates of return. The second research question asks, will lost letters addressed to The Committee For Penal Reform receive significantly greater returns than lost letters addressed to The Committee For The Legalization of Marijuana. The final and third research question asks, will lost letters addressed to The Committee For The Legalization of Marijuana

be returned at a significantly lower rate than letters addressed to John Charles.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Subjects selected for the current investigation were operators of automobiles from three Oklahoma cities: Oklahoma City, Stillwater, and Holdenville. Identification of subjects was made upon the basis of the license plates on vehicles. Oklahoma license plates are coded so as to allow identification of the county where purchased; it was assumed that most people would purchase license plates in their county of residence. A further assumption was made that when a vehicle was found in a city within a county, the person operating the vehicle resided in the city.

Actual sampling was done using a systematic randomization procedure which involved sampling every ninth car bearing the required identification in the appropriate city. Both residential and business areas were sampled from in each city.

Experimental equipment consisted of 270 stamped and addressed envelopes, all containing identical ambiguous letters. The envelopes were addressed to three different recipients. Ninety of the envelopes were addressed to The Committee For The Legalization of Marijuana, 90 were addressed to The Committee For Penal Reform, and 90 were addressed to Mr. John Charles. All envelopes had identical mailing addresses. The letters contained in the envelopes read as follows: "I will send you the photographs you have requested as soon as possible."

Envelopes were unobtrusively coded so identification of the city from which it was distributed in could be made. Envelopes for use in Oklahoma City were coded with small red ink marks inside the envelopes; envelopes for use in Stillwater had black ink marks inside; and envelopes distributed in Holdenville had no marks inside the envelopes. On receipt of the mailed lost letters, the envelopes were opened and the point of origin was written on the outside of the envelope. Final totals were made after two weeks from the day of distribution in each city.

In addition to the prepared letters, 270 handwritten notes were also prepared. These notes were written on small pieces of paper and read, "Found near car."

Three separate days were required for the distribution of 90 letters to each separate city. Thirty letters of each address were distributed in the Oklahoma cities of Holdenville, Oklahoma City, and Stillwater. The dates of distribution were: Holdenville, February 1, 1974; Oklahoma City, February 2, 1974; and Stillwater, February 5, 1974.

The distribution of lost letters was accomplished in this manner: Using a systematic randomization procedure, a parked vehicle was selected. If the vehicle had the proper license plate identification, a letter and a handwritten note was placed under the windshield wiper. This procedure was followed until all letters had been "lost" in each city.

Placement of "lost" letters was done unobtrusively as possible in order to avoid attracting attention to the experiment. In distribution of 270 lost letters, it was necessary to explain the experimenter's actions only once. This occurred when a car owner seemingly appeared

from nowhere and discovered the experimenter placing a letter under his car's windshield wiper.

Obtained data was analyzed by the use of chi square test of significance. Chi square was used because it is a well known distribution free statistic requiring only nominal level data. Calculations were performed on an electronic calculator.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In the current investigation returned letters were counted after a period of three weeks following distribution. Most letters were returned within four days following distribution. The following results were noted

TABLE I
LETTERS DISTRIBUTED

Address	Location		
	Oklahoma City	Holdenville	Stillwater
John Charles	30	30	30
Committee For Penal Reform	30	30	30
Committee For Legalization of Marijuana	30	30	30

TABLE II
LETTERS RETURNED

Address	Location		
	Oklahoma City	Holdenville	Stillwater
John Charles	18	23	22
Committee For Penal Reform	18	17	25
Committee For Legalization of Marijuana	8	8	8

TABLE III
TOTAL LETTERS RETURNED WITH POSITIVE AND
NEGATIVE ADDRESSES

Address Category	Letters Returned
Positive Address Committee For Penal Reform	60
Negative Address Committee For Legalization of Marijuana	24

$$X^2 = 15.42$$

$$P < .001$$

TABLE IV

TOTAL LETTERS RETURNED WITH POSITIVE ADDRESS
AND ADDRESSED TO THE COMMITTEE FOR
LEGALIZATION OF MARIJUANA

Address Category	Letters Returned
Committee For Penal Reform	60
Committee For Legalization of Marijuana	24
	$X^2 = 15.42$ $P < .001$

TABLE V

TOTAL LETTERS RETURNED WITH NEGATIVE ADDRESS AND
ADDRESSED TO JOHN CHARLES

Address Category	Letters Returned
Negative Address Committee For Legalization of Marijuana	24
John Charles	64
	$X^2 = 18.18$ $P < .001$

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The major question of the current investigation asked if the lost-letter technique was sufficiently sensitive to discriminate population perception differences regarding varying social issues. The results indicate that the letter return rate variance between a positively and a negatively perceived organization is significantly different at the .001 level in the direction predicted.

The percentage difference of letters returned between a positively perceived organization and a negatively perceived organization in the current study was 41.1. Milgram, et al. (1965) found a difference of 47% between letters returned that were addressed to positively and negatively perceived organizations. In view of these results, the lost-letter technique would seem to be capable of discriminating between issues that evoke extreme position in a populace.

The second question on the current investigation is whether penal reform is regarded as a positive social issue in Oklahoma. The obtained rates of returned letters addressed to The Committee For Penal Reform was sufficiently greater than the return rate of letters addressed to The Committee For The Legalization of Marijuana to reject the null hypothesis at the .001 level in the direction predicted.

A difference of 41.1% between letters returned addressed to The Committee For The Legalization of Marijuana and The Committee For Penal

was found in the current investigation. Milgram, et al. (1965) found a difference of 47% between returns of lost letters addressed to a positive and negative social organization, the positive organization receiving the greater number of returned lost letters. It may be concluded that positively perceived organizations will receive returned letters at a rate that is significantly greater than negatively perceived organizations. Penal reform would, therefore, seem to be a positively perceived issue in Oklahoma.

In the legalization of marijuana, a negatively perceived social issue in Oklahoma, is the final question to be considered in the current investigation. Returns of the lost letters addressed to John Charles and to The Committee For The Legalization of Marijuana were found to be significantly different at the .001 level of significance in the direction predicted.

A percentage difference of 46 between lost letters returned addressed to a negatively perceived organization and an individual was found by Milgram, et al. (1965). The current study demonstrated a percentage difference of 46.6 between returned letters addressed to John Charles and to The Committee For Legalization of Marijuana. It may, therefore, be concluded that Oklahoma residents generally regard the legalization of marijuana as being a negative social issue.

Milgram (1969a), suggested using an N per cell of at least 100; the current investigation produced results remarkably similar to Milgram (1969a) with the use of an N of 30 per cell. Perhaps the technique is sufficiently sensitive with an N of less than 100 to separate population attitudes regarding controversial issues.

Major difficulties still are encountered using the technique. Inherent difficulties include that of the sample being unknown, lack of precise knowledge about non-returns, and built in bias against middle positions on issues. Also, the stimulus and method of measurement remain crude.

Further investigation using the technique is needed. Concurrent survey research could provide an estimate of the degree of accuracy possible using the technique. Investigation in the area of improving the actual genuine appearance of the lost letters to look more genuine themselves could also prove fruitful.

It does seem clear that the technique can provide a rough, quick, and relatively cheap method of assessing community opinion. Results when interpreted with the limitations of the technique being considered can provide insight into opinion in controversial areas.

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