

ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: PSY2013-0513

Athens Institute for Education and Research

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ATINER's Conference Paper Series

PSY2013-0513

**An International Lost Letter
Study: Measuring Attitudes
Toward Middle-Easterners**

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URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN 2241-2891
28/08/2013

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Phillips, W., Gharib, A. and Davis, M. (2013) "An International Lost Letter Study: Measuring Attitudes Toward Middle-Easterners" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: PSY2013-0513.

**An International Lost Letter Study:
Measuring Attitudes Toward Middle-Easterners**

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Abstract

The lost-letter technique (Milgram, Mann & Harter, 1965) was employed in six cities in the United States and Europe to examine attitudes towards Middle-Easterners. A total of 240 letters (40 in each of six cities: Chicago, Portland and Honolulu in the U.S. and Rome, Krakow and Berlin in Europe) were dropped either close to (5 ft) or far from (60 ft) a mailbox in the downtown area of each city. Half the envelopes were addressed to a stereotypical Middle-Eastern name, the other half to a European name. The overall return rate was 59.6%. Results revealed that there was no difference in the return rates of the two names.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:

Introduction

A prevailing issue when conducting attitudinal research using questionnaires is that participants may respond in a socially desirable manner (even under conditions of anonymity). After all, it is considered taboo by most people to discuss religion or politics at dinner parties, let alone in response to surveys. This may be even more problematic when examining prejudice and racist attitudes. Augoustinos (2009) reported that in the United States over the past 50 years, it has become increasingly less socially acceptable to openly express racist and/or stereotypical attitudes toward members of an outgroup. This change in social norms makes the observation of discriminatory actions more difficult, as these actions become more passive and subtle (Petrykowski, Davis, Brown, Hastings, Butler and Pryor, 2010). These passive forms of negative sentiment may take many shapes: avoidance of areas or neighborhoods where the outgroup reside, avoidance of eye contact, or other subtle gestures. These passive behaviors may culminate in passive discrimination, including refusal to help or the failure to give service (Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2007).

In a classic social psychology study, Milgram, Mann and Harter (1965) developed a methodologically simple technique to assess community attitudes in an unobtrusive manner. Known as the Lost-Letter Technique (LLT), the procedure involves 'dropping' letters in random places in a community and measuring the response rates of letters that were posted. In the original study, 100 stamped letters were addressed to each of the following: 1) Friends of the Communist Party, 2) Friends of the Nazi Party, 3) Medical Research Associates, or 4) Mr. Walter Carnap. All 400 letters were addressed to the same P.O. box in New Haven, CT. Results revealed a significant difference among return rates; the Medical Group and individual letters were returned at a 70% rate, whereas the return rate of letters addressed to either the Communist or Nazi party were returned at a rate of 25%. Milgram et. al. concluded the technique may be useful for measuring community attitudes toward controversial political and social issues. The technique may also be used to measure altruism. Deaux (1974) found that more postcards were returned when they contained important information (regarding medical results) than unimportant (information concerning arrival of ordered merchandise) . Furthermore, Levine (1998) reported that return rates of lost letters were positively correlated with other types of 'helping' behaviors, which varied from city to city.

Though the LLT has been shown to be effective in measuring community attitudes and helping behavior, the evidence supporting a relationship between attitudes and voting behavior is inconclusive. While some researchers have found a correspondence between LLT return rates and community election issues (Milgram, 1969; Shotland, Berger & Forsythe, 1970), others showed that the LLT method did not confirm election results for individual politicians (Wicker, 1969; Jacoby & Aranoff, 1971). In addition, Bolton (1974) found that when interviewed face to face on whether busing should be implemented to integrate

the public schools, 29% of White Americans and 89% of Black Americans supported the bill, whereas the rates for returning lost letters to the 'Citizens Committee to Support Busing' was 53% and 51%, respectively.

Inconsistency in predicting voting behavior aside, the LLT technique has revealed differences in return rates for various groups, supposedly reflecting community prejudice. Bridges, Williamson, Thompson, and Windsor (2001) reported that letters addressed to a group named "Advocates for Battered and Abused Lesbians" had a lower return rate than letters addressed to either "Advocates for Battered and Abused Men" or "Advocates for Battered and Abused Women". Kremer, Barry and McNally (1986) found return-rate differences in Northern Ireland between letters addressed to traditionally Catholic and Protestant surnames, but this only occurred in areas that had been sites of religious protest and violence. In a similar procedure involving graduate application forms, Benson, Karabernick and Lerner (1976) dropped graduate application forms at an airport that included pictures that varied by race and attractiveness. Their results showed that a higher portion of applications that included an attractive picture or Caucasian picture were returned.

Particularly since the events of September 11, 2001 (the 9/11 terrorist attacks), sentiment towards Arabs and Arab-Americans has become increasingly more negative, and has shifted the study of racial prejudice in the United States from African-Americans to Arab-Americans and persons of Middle-Eastern descent (Petrykowski, Davis, Brown, Hastings, Butler and Pryor, 2010; Ahmed, 2010). Acts of violence involving persons of Muslim or Middle-Eastern descent receive heightened media attention (such as the shootings at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009 and the bombing at the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013) as acts of terror 'against Americans'. The term 'terrorist' is not used for incidents not involving persons of Middle-Eastern descent (such as the Aurora, Colorado shootings or the Newtown, Maine elementary school shootings).

This prejudice and discrimination toward Middle-Easterners has been recently studied using the lost-letter paradigm. Bushman and Bonacci (2004) used a 'lost email' - an email that had been misdirected - to examine this prejudice. Introductory Psychology students were sent the misdirected emails informing acceptance of a scholarship containing either a Middle-Eastern or European name and had to make a decision whether to send it to the correct individual. More emails addressed to European names were 'passed on' to the correct student.

Lower rates of return do not always occur for Middle-Eastern names. These studies are not limited to the United States - Ahmed (2010) conducted two lost-letter studies in Stockholm, Sweden. In Experiment 1, 100 letters addressed with either a typical Middle-Eastern name or Swedish name containing money were dropped in classrooms and buildings on a university campus. More letters with Swedish names were returned (with the money intact). Experiment 2 replicated the method of the first experiment, with the exception of dispersing the envelopes in downtown Stockholm and adding postcards that did

not contain money. Results showed that when money was included, fewer Middle-Eastern addressed letters were returned. However, when postcards were used (containing no money) return rates between the Swedish name and Middle-Eastern name were the same. A lack of Middle-Eastern discrimination in letter return is not atypical. Petrykowski, Davis, Brown, Hastings, Butler and Pryor (2010) left 200 applications (addressed with either a Middle-Eastern or European surname) to a honor society at non-campus locations in a university town in the southern United States. Significantly *more* applications with a Middle-Eastern name (specifically with a birthplace of Iraq) were returned than those containing a European name.

Hypotheses

While it is quite clear that the LLT technique can be a useful method for discerning passive prejudice of particular controversial groups and organizations, research examining prejudice towards individuals has returned mixed results. The present study attempted to add to the literature concerning the LLT as an assessment of attitudes of individuals, while incorporating a comparison of different countries. A second additional variable manipulated effort. It was hypothesized that 1) letters addressed to a European surname would be returned at a higher rate than letters addressed to a Middle-Eastern surname, 2) this pattern of differential return rate would be equivalent between Europe and the United States, and 3) that letters requiring more effort to be posted (dropped further from a mailbox) would be returned at a lesser rate.

Method

Forty stamped envelopes (240 total) with no return address were dropped in each of six cities in the United States and Europe. The three American cities included Chicago, IL, Portland, OR and Honolulu, HI; the three European cities included Berlin, Germany, Krakow, Poland and Rome, Italy. Cities were chosen by convenience; the authors either had business there or were traveling to these cities for vacation.

Each envelope contained a letter (in case it was opened) stating that the sender could not make a job interview but was still highly interested in meeting to discuss future employment. In each city, 20 envelopes were addressed to a stereotypical Middle-Eastern name (e.g. Hossein C. Gharib) and 20 envelopes were addressed to a stereotypical European name (Harlan C. Phillips). The street addresses used were those of the authors, residing in San Francisco or Oakland, California. For each city, the first name was changed so that the first letter identified the city in which the envelope was dropped (e.g. 'Hossein' for Honolulu, 'Robert' for Rome). The middle initial on each envelope designated the distance that the envelope would be dropped from a mailbox ('C' for close - 5 feet, 'F' for far - 60 feet). Counterbalancing for name and distance, all envelopes were dropped within view of a mailbox in the downtown area of

each city. This resulted in 20 envelopes dropped in each city (10 close and 10 far) for each name.

Results

The number of letters returned for each name by city appears in Table 1. Overall, 59.6% of all envelopes were returned. The first hypothesis that European names would be returned at a higher rate than Middle-Eastern names was not supported. As predicted by the second hypothesis, Pearson's Chi-square analysis revealed no relationship between Name of Addressee and Region with regard to rates of return, $\chi^2(1) = 0.15, p > 0.05$. This result also held true when examining return rates of Name of Addressee by City, $\chi^2(5) = 0.74, p > .05$.

The third hypothesis predicted that envelopes dropped near a mailbox (within 5 feet) would more likely be returned than those dropped further away (60 feet). Goodness of Fit Chi-square analysis supported this prediction - 68% of the 'Close' envelopes were returned as opposed to 52% of the 'Far' envelopes, $\chi^2(1) = 6.25, p < 0.05$.

Inspection of the returns rates led the investigators to test the difference in overall return of envelopes between Europe and the United States. Overall return rates of the two regions were 53% and 67% respectively, a difference that proved to be significant (Goodness of Fit Chi-square, $\chi^2(1) = 5.00, p < 0.05$). This difference was largely due the poor return rate from Rome (43%).

Discussion

The main hypothesis that fewer letters with a Middle-Eastern name would be returned in both the United States and Europe was not supported. Rates of return were virtually identical for all six cities that were incorporated in the study. These results are similar to previous studies examining return rates of letters with European and Middle-Eastern surnames (Ahmed, 2010; Petrykowski et. al., 2010). One reason for the lack of a difference may be due to the use of individuals, rather than organizations, on the letters. Milgram (1969) suggested that in order to detect differences in attitude, organizations must be used that instill in the community a 'polarization of emotional response', a suggestion that was supported by much of the early research using the LLT technique (Bolton, 1974).

Situational factors may influence the decision to return a lost letter. Petrykowski et. al. (2010) actually found that returns rates were *higher* for an Iraqi surname when the lost letter was an application for a honor society (the birthplace of the individual was also manipulated). The authors theorized that sympathy for the Iraq war may have been responsible for this result. Furthermore, Ahmed (2010) found equal return rates for postcards, but fewer

returns of a letter addressed to a Middle-Eastern name when money was included in the letter. Participants discriminated against Middle-Easterners only under conditions in which they profited by the action. Similarly, Kremer et. al. (1986) reported that differences in return rates between Protestant and Catholic surnames in Northern Ireland only occurred in communities where there had been outbreaks of violence, and Benson et. al. (1976) found differences in the return of graduate school applications, but a picture depicting the race of the 'applicant' was included. Perhaps name alone is not a salient enough trait to invoke a prejudiced response (explaining a lack of a difference in return rate found in the present study). These studies, taken together, support the current authors' theory (similar to that of Milgram, 1969) that salient situational information is necessary to evoke a polarized response from the participant deciding to return the letter. Based on the research by Ahmed (for the return of postcards), there was no reason to suspect that Europeans' return rates would be different than that of Americans (Hypothesis #2).

Finally, it was hypothesized that letters dropped near a mailbox would be returned at a greater rate than letters dropped a mere 60 feet away. This variable was included to increase the likelihood that a participant would actually read the address. The hypothesis was supported, but did not affect rates of return between the two ethnic groups. Helping behavior is determined by costs associated with that behavior, and increasing effort decreases the probability of the occurrence of helping, even when the cost is small (Levine, 1997; Deaux, 1974).

Summary

One potential flaw in the present study is that all letters addressed to the Middle Eastern surname went to one city, and the letters addressed to the European surname went to a different city (creating a possible neighborhood effect). This was done to reduce suspicion that a study was to be conducted, and there was no reason to suspect a neighborhood effect from persons living in the United States. However, when the study was expanded to include cities in Europe, this decision became more problematic, as San Francisco is more widely known in Europe than Oakland. The authors are currently conducting a replication to correct for this potentially confounding variable. Nevertheless, the present study is part of an increasing body of literature supporting the use of the LLT in measuring passive discrimination towards different ethnic groups. Though no attitude difference was found, it is suggested that this is due to an absence of salient information pointing to an emotional polarization in the community, rather than a design flaw.

Acts of violence by radical Muslims do not represent the ideology of all Muslims, only a select few. Just as acts of discrimination and violence against Muslims are not perpetrated by all non- Muslim Americans and non-Muslim Europeans, but by a small radical minority (see Petrykowski et. al. & Ahmed for examples of discriminatory acts towards Muslims). Perhaps it is a naive conclusion, but we would like to believe that people are moving away from

categorizing an entire ethnic group based on the actions of a minority of members from that group. Perhaps we are growing as a global community.

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Table 1. *Observed Frequencies of Envelopes Returned by Name for Each City**

Region - City		Name of Addressee		Total
		Middle Eastern	European	
USA	Chicago	16	15	31
	Hawaii	11	14	25
	Portland	11	13	24
Europe	Berlin	12	12	24
	Krakow	12	10	22
	Rome	8	9	17
Total Count		70	73	143

*Note - 20 envelopes were dropped for each name in each city (Total = 240)