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The Lost Letter Technique: A New Approach to the Study of Black Attitudes in Denver

THE LOST LETTER TECHNIQUE: A NEW APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF BLACK ATTITUDES IN DENVER

INTRODUCTION

AS a result of the barriers of discrimination and hatred that have restricted the black man in his attempt to better his standard of living, several groups have arisen in the black community in an attempt to free him. Two of these groups are the N.A.A.C.P. and the Black Panthers. The N.A.A.C.P. is seen by most people as a moderate organization dedicated to bettering the economic and social conditions of the black man by working within the framework of the American legal system. Since its founding early in the Twentieth Century, the N.A.A.C.P. has championed the cause of the American Negro and has brought about significant changes in American society by helping to strike down racial barriers. Through its peaceful methods, it has attained many of its goals and has attracted widespread support among both Negroes and whites.

However, there are many blacks who feel that the N.A.A.C.P. is moving too slowly. Many black action groups have been organized, the best known of which is the Black Panthers. The Panthers are avowed revolutionaries who will not wait out the slow evolution of society that accompanies tremendous social change. From its humble beginnings in the early 1960's in Oakland, California, the Panther party has grown rapidly in membership to a few thousand blacks, mostly young. The Panthers demand action now. They feel that their race has been trodden upon too often and too long, and that the only way meaningful change will be made is through violent destruction of the white power structure in the United States.

The contrast between the two organizations has generated a great deal of controversy in both black and white communities as to which group has gained the most widespread acceptance by the Negro population and, concomitantly, which approach to the black-white problem is, therefore, likely to prevail. Because of the social and legal implications inherent in such a controversy, it was decided to conduct a study to determine the attitudes of Denver's black community toward both organizations. This article sets forth the results of that study and suggests some conclusions which can be drawn therefrom.

I. THE LOST LETTER TECHNIQUE

When it was decided to study black attitudes in the metropolitan Denver area towards the Black Panthers and the more moderate

N.A.A.C.P., there was a conscious desire to avoid some of the problems generally encountered by researchers. For example, a person confronted with interviews and questionnaires is immediately aware that he is in a special situation. He knows that he has been chosen as part of a study and that his response will be intensively scrutinized and evaluated. As a result, his statements do not always reflect his actual opinions. The problem becomes more acute in research concerning politically sensitive issues and is further increased when racial overtones exist, *i.e.*, when white interviewers attempt an attitude survey among black respondents. The significance of this latter problem is underscored by the recent feelings of resentment toward constant study by governmental and other institutional groups evidenced in black communities.

In an effort to minimize such difficulties, the technique adopted for this study was one developed several years ago by Dr. Stanley Milgram of the City University of New York.¹ It utilizes the return of "lost letters" to determine how people feel and, more importantly, how they would act toward different political organizations. In essence, the technique measures attitudes without peoples' knowledge through their actions instead of their words.²

The technique is a simple one. The investigators distribute or drop a large number of letters, addressed and stamped, throughout the areas of the city under study. A person who finds one of these "lost letters" must decide what he is going to do with it — should he mail it, disregard it, or destroy it? Dr. Milgram has found that, "there is a widespread feeling among people that one *ought* to mail such a letter."³ However, when a person finds a letter addressed to a highly objectionable organization, he may not mail it at all. Thus, by varying the addresses on the letters and later calculating the percentage returned for each address, one can measure sentiment towards an organization. As Dr. Milgram states:

The technique gets around certain problems inherent in the survey interview — the usual method of assessing attitudes. When a research team wants to test public sentiment on a social issue, it ordinarily chooses a representative group of persons from the community, and questions them. The methods for selecting a representative sample have

¹ Professor Milgram directs the doctoral program in social psychology at the university and is also professor of psychology.

² S. Milgram, *The Lost Letter Technique*, PSYCHOLOGY TODAY June, 1969, at 30. Dr. Milgram describes the technique as follows:

The technique was one that would measure attitudes without people's knowledge, through their actions instead of their words. The lost-letter technique was one solution. Lost letters have been used to inflame a populace and to study personal honesty, but we were interested in using the returns as a clue to how people felt and, more important, how they would act toward different political organizations. The information we gathered would be sociological, not psychological. We could not know about the individuals who returned the letters, but we would have a return rate specific to each organization, and thus useful for certain purposes. The nature of the procedure guaranteed the anonymity of those who took part. *Id.* at 32.

³ *Id.* at 30.

been worked out in a very careful fashion, and are so effective that a sample of only 1,200 persons can be used to predict national trends with great accuracy. But it remains true that once the person is selected for questioning, the information must come through a structured conversation. The resulting measurements measure only what the person *says*. This exclusive focus on verbal accounts, though of great utility, seems an unwise fixation in any scientific social psychology. It ought to be possible to measure deeds on a large scale and in a way that permits experimental variation.⁴

Using the lost letter technique, the respondent is not asked to speak. Rather his act or failure to act in response to an issue with social and political connotations speaks for him. This overt behavior will then reveal something about the manner in which he relates to a particular organization. In a subtle way, he is, in effect, asked to either aid the organization or to hinder it; and, thus, he will hopefully reveal his actual feelings and attitudes toward the organization.

Dr. Milgram has employed the technique in several studies. In the first, carried out in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1963, the members of his research team addressed 100 envelopes to each of two organizations that would doubtless prove unpopular with New Havenites: *Friends of the Nazi Party* and *Friends of the Communist Party*. As a control, they addressed 100 more envelopes to an organization about which they expected people to feel positively — *Medical Research Associates* — and 100 to a private person, *Mr. Walter Carnap*.⁵

The envelopes were all addressed to the same Post Office box in New Haven, and all contained identical letters. The letter was straightforward but was so designed as to interact suggestively with the four organizations. The letters were distributed in ten pre-selected districts in New Haven: along sidewalks, in outdoor phone booths, in shops, and under automobile windshields (with a note attached saying "found near your car"). Each letter had been unobtrusively coded for a section of the city.

In a few days the letters came in and, as predicted, in unequal numbers. Whereas 72 percent of the *Medical Research* letters and 71 percent of the *personal letters* came back, only 25 percent of the *Nazi* and *Communist* letters were returned. "The initial results and the discrepant return rates showed that the basic premise of the technique held up: the probability of lost letters being returned depends on the political and social attributes of the organization to which they are addressed."⁶

The New Haven study showed the technique could work. Dr. Milgram next wanted to see if it could be applied to a current social issue. Therefore, in 1963, at the peak of racial tension in the South, a research team armed with a batch of letters addressed to pro-civil rights

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.* at 31.

⁶ *Id.* at 33.

groups and anti-civil rights groups went to South Carolina and dispersed the letters in black and white neighborhoods in several tobacco towns. In black neighborhoods, the pro-civil rights letters were returned in greater numbers, while letters addressed to the *Council for White Neighborhoods* came in more strongly from white residential areas. "Thus the technique seemed applicable to a real social issue and was also responsive to a demographic variable."⁷

However, the technique still had one serious shortcoming — there was no real evidence of its validity. What was needed was an objective criterion against which the results of a study could be measured, and the 1964 Presidential election provided that opportunity.

To test the validity of the technique, letters were distributed in several election wards in Boston addressed to the following: *Committee to Elect Goldwater*, *Committee to Defeat Goldwater*, *Committee to Elect Johnson*, and *Committee to Defeat Johnson*. The lost letter technique correctly predicted the outcome of the election in each of the wards! But it seems the technique only identified the trend, for it badly underestimated the strength of Johnson support. Overall, it only gave Johnson a 10 percent lead over Goldwater, when the actual election returns in these wards gave Johnson a margin closer to 60 percent.

This suggests that the difference in return rates of letters will always be weaker than the extent of actual difference of community opinion. Even if a person plans to vote for Johnson, he may still be a good enough fellow to mail a pro-Goldwater letter. And some letters are always picked up and mailed by children, illiterates and street cleaners. There is a good deal of unwanted variance in the returns.⁸

In short, while there is some question about the degree of validity, the lost letter technique is a way in which social attitudes can be somewhat accurately measured without some of the problems inherent in other research techniques. Since it was decided to use the lost letter approach in comparing the attitudes of Denver blacks toward the Black Panthers and the N.A.A.C.P., it only remained to apply the technique to the study in question.

II. APPLICATION OF THE TECHNIQUE TO THE DENVER STUDY

In applying the lost letter technique to the purposes of the study, it first became necessary to define the areas in which the study was to be conducted. Using United States census tracts and areas surveyed by the Denver Planning Office,⁹ specific segments of Denver County were defined for use in the study. The total number of Negroes within the

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 66.

⁹ United States census tracts 16, 31.01, 36.01, 23, 24.01, 24.02, 25 and Park Hill areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, which included census tracts 41.02, 42.03, 42.01, 42.02, and part of tract 41.01. Thus, a total of fifteen neighborhoods were used in the study.

specific areas was estimated to be 34,349, approximately 49.6 percent of the total black population of Denver County.¹⁰

The next step involved printing 400 envelopes and dividing them into four groups of 100 envelopes each, according to their fictitious addresses. The envelopes addressed to *Louis Campbell* and to *Medical Research Associates* served as the control letters, and those addressed to the *Friends of the Black Panthers* and *Friends of the N.A.A.C.P.* were used to measure the opinion of the community toward the two groups under study.

In order to get an even distribution of letters throughout the tracts, the total number of letters was divided into the total number of blacks in the areas surveyed, and a ratio of one letter to every 86 Negroes was derived. This figure was then divided into the absolute number of Negroes in each area,¹¹ giving the number of letters to be dropped in each tract. The letters were coded according to the areas in which they were dropped in order to determine what percentage of letters were returned by various income groups in the Negro community.¹²

The actual distribution of the letters involved traveling through the selected areas and placing the letters at various locations to give the appearance that the letters had been lost. The letters were left face-up on sidewalks and curbs, at cross walks and bus stops, and in telephone booths. Similar to the Milgram studies, some letters were dropped in stores and restaurants, and a few were placed under the windshield wipers of cars with a note scribbled on them "found next to your car."

To aid in "losing" the letters, several black children were employed. It was felt that in a black community, white people would obviously be more noticeable and would bring greater attention to themselves walking around dropping letters. In addition, by using people who were more familiar with the neighborhoods, the letters were dropped near heavily traveled streets and in facilities predominantly used by Negroes.

The letters were dropped in their respective neighborhoods between six and eight o'clock on Sunday evening, February 8, 1970. By dropping the letters at night, it was possible to put them in desired locations without the study participants appearing too conspicuous.

¹⁰ Total black population estimated in 1970 to be 69,219. Estimate prepared by Denver Planning Office.

¹¹ It was necessary to find out the absolute number of Negroes in each census tract. Using figures obtained from the Head Start study on percentage of Negroes in the tracts and multiplying those percentages by the absolute number of people in the tracts, the absolute number of blacks in each area was determined. In addition, the study by the Denver Planning Office of Park Hill gave the absolute numbers of Negroes in areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 of the geographic analysis.

¹² The United States census tracts used in the study were designated neighborhoods A-6 and were generally neighborhoods which reflected a low income level, according to the 1960 census which computed the median income of families in each census tract in Denver County. The Park Hill areas were designated neighborhoods H-O and reflect a higher income level.

Addressee	Date returned	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	Total
Friends of the Black Panthers	2/9								1								1
	2/10		2	2		2	2		1		2						11
	2/11				4		1			1	1						7
	2/12																0
	2/13						1										1
	2/16																0
																	20
Neighborhood Totals		13	12	18	29	13	17	3	7	11	13	8	4	7	6	5	166

Table No. 2 shows the breakdown of the letters according to the number received on each collection date. It should be noted that since the letters were dropped on Sunday night, it was to be expected that the largest return would be on Tuesday, February 10.

TABLE NO. 2

Collection Date	No. Collected
Mon., Feb. 9	4
Tues., Feb. 10	105
Wed., Feb. 11	31
Thurs., Feb. 12	17
Fri., Feb. 13	3
Mon., Feb. 16	6
Total	166

Table No. 3 analyzes the data with respect to neighborhood and type of letter. After each neighborhood is the total number of letters that were dropped in that area. By dividing this number by four, the number of letters in each category dropped in a particular neighborhood can be computed.¹⁸ This number is then used to figure the percentage of return for each category in each neighborhood. For example, by looking at the chart one can see that 86 percent of the personal letters were returned from neighborhood A. The totals at the end of the table show the total number and percentage of return for a particular neighborhood. The average return rate for a neighborhood was 47 percent.

¹⁸ Since some numbers are not divisible by four, any area that contained a number of Negroes not evenly divisible by four was given extra letters, but no area received more than two extra letters having the same addressee.

Neighborhood	Total number of letters in neighborhood	PERSONAL		MEDICAL RESEARCH		FRIENDS OF N.A.A.C.P.		FRIENDS OF BLACK PANTHERS		TOTAL	
		no. returned	%	no. returned	%	no. returned	%	no. returned	%	no. returned	%
A	25	5	86	5	86	3	50	0	0	13	58
B	40	2	20	6	60	2	20	2	20	12	30
C	38	4	40	6	60	6	60	2	20	18	47
D	98	8	32	10	40	7	28	4	16	29	29
E	35	5	56	4	44	2	22	2	22	13	37
F	35	3	33	6	67	4	44	4	44	17	49
G	5	1	100	1	100	1	100	0	0	3	60
H	8	2	100	1	50	2	100	2	100	7	88
I	21	5	100	4	80	1	20	1	20	11	53
J	22	3	60	4	80	6	60	3	60	13	59
K	18	2	40	3	60	3	60	0	0	8	44
L	15	2	50	1	25	1	25	0	0	4	27
M	16	3	75	3	75	1	25	0	0	7	44
N	13	2	67	3	100	1	33	0	0	6	46
O	11	2	67	3	100	0	0	0	0	5	45

TABLE NO. 3

The following two bar graphs are, perhaps, the most revealing. Graph No. 1 shows the percentage of return for each group of addressed letters and total percentage of return. These figures constitute the essence of the results. Graph No. 2 shows the same information for Dr. Milgram's New Haven study. In both studies, 400 letters (100 for each group) were dropped. The slight difference in total return can be attributed to the inherent differences between a New Haven, Connecticut community and a black Denver community. This will become clearer with the later comparison of the lower income and the higher income black communities. This difference between communities can also be traced to the use of two low response groups in the New Haven study (Communists and Nazis) as compared to only one low response group in this study (Panthers).

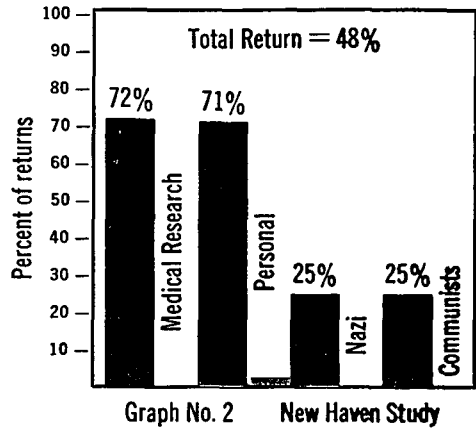
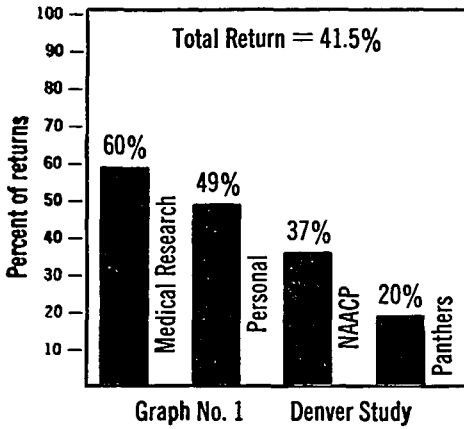


Table No. 4 compares the computed return for a given neighborhood with the actual return for that neighborhood and shows the discrepancy, if any, between the two. The computed return was arrived at by dividing the number of letters dropped in a neighborhood by the total number of letters dropped (400) and multiplying that figure by the total number of letters returned (166).¹⁴

Neighborhood	Computed Return	Actual Return	Discrepancy
A	10	13	+ 3
B	16	12	- 4
C	16	18	+ 2
D	41	29	-12
E	14	13	- 1
F	14	17	+ 3
G	2	3	+ 1
H	4	7	+ 3
I	8	11	+ 3
J	8	13	+ 5
K	8	8	0
L	6	4	- 2
M	6	7	+ 1
N	5	6	+ 1
O	4	5	+ 1

TABLE NO. 4

¹⁴ For example, if 200 letters (or $\frac{1}{2}$ of the total number of letters dropped) were dropped in neighborhood X, one would expect that about $\frac{1}{2}$ of the letters returned ($\frac{1}{2}$ of 166 or 83) would be from X. This comparison shows if there were any areas that seriously strayed from the mark. As can be seen from the table, areas D (-12) and J (+5) are the only two serious deviants. Area D's low response could be the result of over-saturation of a small neighborhood that had a large population and consequently received a large number of letters (98).

The final two tables (Table No. 5 and Table No. 6) are concerned with the difference in results between the higher and the lower income neighborhoods. The higher income neighborhoods (Table No. 5) included areas H through O where the median family income is between \$6,000 and \$8,000. Generally, this is the area near Stapleton Airport. The lower income neighborhoods included areas A through G where the median family income is between \$2,000 and \$4,000 (except for area B which has a median family income between \$4,000 and \$6,000. This is the area on the eastern fringe of downtown Denver.

The results show almost no difference whatsoever between the Black Panther and the N.A.A.C.P. returns from the lower and higher income groups. There is, however, a considerable difference in percent of return of the control letters and in percent of total return with respect to the two income levels. It should be noted how the returns of the higher income group correspond to those in the New Haven study (see Graph No. 2). There seems to be a greater similarity between the higher income black community and the New Haven community as opposed to the lower income black community and the New Haven community.

Type of Letter	No. Returned	Total Dropped	%
Personal	21	31	68
Medical Research	22	31	71
N.A.A.C.P.	12	31	39
Panthers	6	31	19
Totals =	61	124	49

Table No. 5 Higher Income

Type of Letter	No. Returned	Total Dropped	%
Personal	28	69	41
Medical Research	38	69	55
N.A.A.C.P.	25	69	36
Panthers	14	69	20
Totals =	105	276	38

Table No. 6 Lower Income

CONCLUSION

The statistics from the survey indicate that the Negroes of Denver are more likely to support the N.A.A.C.P. than the Black Panthers by a ratio of almost two to one. Taken at face value, the statistics pose an interesting question: Why *do* the results suggest that Negroes favor the N.A.A.C.P. over the Black Panthers?

One rationale might be that Negroes in Denver have better living conditions and lead somewhat better lives than blacks in other metropolitan areas. At the 56th annual convention of the N.A.A.C.P. held in Denver in July, 1965, information was introduced which tended to show that Denver Negroes were "better off" than Negroes elsewhere:

Discussions with persons identified with racial problems in Denver appeared to confirm the feelings of the Negro delegates. They said that the city and the state of Colorado, whose political lives were dominated by the Ku Klux Klan in the nineteen-twenties, had radically

changed in their treatment of Negroes. In part, this change was attributed to the leadership of Mayor Tom Currigan and his administration.

Mr. Currigan and his top officials have been intimately identified with the problems of race relations and have taken the initiative in the organizing efforts to solve these problems.

The size of the Negro community, estimated at 47,000 in a population of a million in the metropolitan Denver area, was said to have reduced the Negro problem to manageable proportions.

A third factor is that the many Federal agencies in Denver serve as the principal employers of Negroes. The estimated rate of Negro unemployment here is put at 8%, compared with rates as high as 20% in other urban centers.

Although a Negro slum area exists in Denver, many Negroes live in integrated sections, a situation that has been favored by the buyer's market in real estate here in recent years. It was also said that public accommodations were not a problem for Negroes here.

Defacto segregation in the schools follows the housing patterns, but the Board of Education is credited with making a determined effort to improve the quality of instruction in Negro schools.

Sebastian Owens, the Urban League's representative in Denver, said today that the League had received strong support from businesses and industry in testing Negro candidates for jobs.¹⁵

Because Denver Negroes are "better off," they would tend to be satisfied with the status quo and would not be willing to give up easily what has taken them so long to achieve. An indication of this feeling is the unwillingness of Denver's Negroes to riot. Indeed, there have only been two of what the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders calls "minor" disturbances in Denver since 1964.¹⁶

Another factor which may have controlled the behavior pattern of the Negro faced with the decision of whether or not to mail the lost letter, is that of familiarity with the organizations involved. The N.A.A.C.P. has been in existence for 60 years and has long been depicted by the news media as a respectable organization which has won many important battles for the Negro in the courts. In contrast, the Black Panther Party is barely four years old and has yet to make any decisive gains for blacks.

This general pattern of familiarity is reflected by the two organizations in Denver. The Denver chapter of the Black Panther Party has a very small membership and has received little publicity or notoriety. To the average Denver citizen, Black Panthers do not actively exist in the city. Contradistinctively, the N.A.A.C.P. has increased its prominence through local activity and by holding its national convention in Denver in 1965. Further, the Association continues to bring suits against local discriminatory business practices and exploitive merchants, attempting to make additional gains for black citizens.

¹⁵ J. FRANKLIN & I. STARR, *THE NEGRO IN 20TH CENTURY AMERICA* 422 (1967).

¹⁶ REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS note 4 at 113 (1968).

Still another possible explanation for the result obtained by the study is the attitude of Denver Negroes toward violence and riots. When asked their views, 6 percent said they were pleased with violence whereas 77 percent were upset by it.¹⁷ Another Denver survey conducted in 1966 concluded that 59 percent of the Negro population would tell their children not to become involved with the police.¹⁸ Clearly those who favor violence are in the minority.

Hence, at the present time most blacks in Denver prefer to work within the legal system in order to achieve desired change. However, as frustration within the community increases, other means of effecting change may become more acceptable. It is the challenge of the legal system to provide and maintain adequate channels of communication and to provide legal accessibility in order to prevent the black community from turning to violence as a solution to its problems.

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¹⁷ D. BAYLEY & H. MENDELSON, MINORITIES AND THE POLICE CONFRONTATION IN AMERICA 178 (1969).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 121.