

LOST LETTER PROCEDURE

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Experimental Methods, Political Psychology

1. Core Definition

The **Lost Letter Procedure** is a classic and powerful experimental design utilized primarily within the field of social psychology to measure attitudes, opinions, and behavioral tendencies towards specific social or political groups in a non-reactive manner. It serves as an ingenious technique for assessing deeply held preferential beliefs or prejudice by observing the willingness of individuals to engage in a small, helpful, and seemingly innocuous action--mailing a letter--when that action benefits an organization or cause. Unlike direct surveys or self-report measures, which are often susceptible to social desirability bias, the Lost Letter Procedure offers researchers an unobtrusive glimpse into the underlying behavioral patterns of individuals aligning with their own ideals, theories, and group affiliations, thus providing a more ecologically valid measure of sentiment regarding potentially controversial topics.

At its essence, the procedure involves distributing a set of prepared, stamped, and addressed letters in public spaces, such as sidewalks, parks, or shopping centers. These letters are "lost" intentionally, appearing as if they were accidentally dropped by someone else. The crucial experimental element is the addressing of these letters; they are typically addressed to fictional or real organizations known to represent opposing viewpoints, such as liberal versus conservative political parties, or groups supporting contested social issues. The experimental hypothesis posits that a person finding the letter will be significantly more likely to deposit it into a mailbox if the recipient organization's views align with their own ideals or values, thus reflecting a subtle, pro-social, in-group bias or preferential action towards that specific ideology. This observed behavior quantifies the extent of latent support or opposition within a given population sample.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The development of the Lost Letter Procedure is intrinsically linked to the search for ethical and reliable methods to measure sensitive social phenomena without alerting participants to the study's true purpose. It was famously pioneered by renowned social psychologist Stanley Milgram and his colleagues in the mid-1960s, a decade characterized by significant civil rights activism, political polarization, and public distrust. Milgram, best known for his provocative obedience experiments, recognized the limitations of traditional, direct attitude measures, which often failed to capture genuine sentiment because participants tended to provide socially acceptable answers rather than expressing true opinions, particularly regarding potentially sensitive or stigmatized groups.

Milgram's foundational work utilized the procedure to gauge public attitudes towards politically extreme or controversial groups, comparing the recovery rates of letters addressed to

organizations like the "Friends of the Communist Party" against more mainstream, accepted entities. The results immediately demonstrated the utility of the method in revealing latent hostility or strong support within communities. Following Milgram's initial implementation, the technique was widely adopted and refined throughout the ensuing decades by researchers studying topics ranging from racial prejudice and xenophobia to environmental activism and local political campaigns. The historical significance of this technique lies in its introduction of a powerful methodological tool capable of quantifying complex, covert social attitudes into measurable, observable behaviors--specifically, the variation in the percentage of letters successfully returned to the intended recipient.

3. Key Characteristics and Methodology

The methodological power of the **Lost Letter Procedure** stems from its adherence to principles of unobtrusive measurement, which ensures that the behavior observed is spontaneous and remains uncontaminated by the participant's awareness of being studied. This characteristic is essential for external validity, as it successfully bypasses common demand characteristics and the self-monitoring inherent in laboratory settings. The procedure is typically executed in high-traffic public areas, guaranteeing a large, diverse, and representative sample of potential participants who are intercepted during their daily routine, thereby maximizing the ecological validity of the findings without requiring explicit consent or participation requests.

The standardized methodology involves several critical steps and controlled components designed specifically to isolate the independent variable of interest, which is the attitude toward the recipient organization. These methodological necessities include: 1) **Standardization:** All "lost" letters must appear identical, addressed neatly, stamped correctly, and often contain a small, seemingly personal note or reference inside to increase the perceived urgency and the probability of someone picking it up. 2) **Manipulation of Recipient:** The independent variable is strictly defined by the name and known nature of the organization addressed on the envelope. Researchers compare a neutral control group (a non-controversial recipient, such as a private individual) against two or more experimental groups representing contrasting ideological positions. 3) **Dependent Variable:** The primary dependent variable is the "recovery rate," calculated as the percentage of letters successfully returned or mailed by the finders. A significantly higher recovery rate for a specific recipient group within a defined area is interpreted as indicative of greater overall positive sentiment, trust, or willingness to help that group within the sampled community.

Unobtrusive Measurement: The technique relies on individuals believing they are performing a private, altruistic act, thereby minimizing potential social desirability bias and maximizing authenticity.

Behavioral Metric: Unlike surveys, attitudes are inferred solely from observable, objective behavior (the act of mailing the letter), providing a robust, non-verbal measure of preference.

Location Specificity: Findings are inherently linked to the geographic location where the letters were dropped, allowing for fine-grained analysis of prevailing political, social, or cultural climates in specific communities.

4. Applications and Examples

The applications of the Lost Letter Procedure span several critical domains within social and political psychology, providing crucial quantitative data where traditional qualitative or self-report measures might be biased or inconclusive. One of the most frequent uses is the measurement of specific **political bias** in different geographical areas. For instance, researchers might drop sets of letters addressed to the local headquarters of the Democratic Party and sets addressed to the Republican Party in various predefined neighborhoods. If the recovery rate is substantially higher for the Republican letters in a conservative suburban zone compared to an urban center, it provides strong behavioral evidence of widespread preferential support, in-group solidarity, or greater perceived legitimacy for that specific political ideology within the tested community.

Beyond explicit political affiliations, the procedure has proven instrumental in studying subtle forms of **prejudice and social exclusion**. Studies have manipulated the recipient's name to suggest different ethnic or religious backgrounds, or addressed letters to organizations supporting controversial or marginalized groups (e.g., an LGBTQ+ advocacy group versus a traditional family values organization). The differential recovery rates serve as a sensitive barometer for the level of latent prejudice or implicit bias present in a society. Furthermore, variations of this technique have been employed to assess the impact of major media events or policy changes on public sympathy. For example, researchers might distribute letters intended for victims of a widely publicized natural disaster immediately before and after a period of intense media coverage to gauge shifts in public willingness to engage in helpful behavior, demonstrating the procedure's utility as a powerful diagnostic tool for measuring community mobilization and sentiment.

5. Significance and Impact

The significance of the **Lost Letter Procedure** lies fundamentally in its crucial contribution to methodological diversity in social research and its exceptional ability to capture authentic human behavior in natural settings. Developed during a period when survey research often dominated psychological and sociological studies, the procedure offered a robust, real-world alternative that skillfully bypassed the ethical complexities and validity issues associated with deceptive laboratory experiments or highly stylized self-report mechanisms. It successfully validated the importance of utilizing non-reactive, field-based measures to study attitudes that people might be unwilling to openly admit due to fear of social disapproval, political correctness, or potential legal ramifications, thereby substantially enhancing the overall reliability and ecological validity of attitude measurement.

Furthermore, the technique provided compelling empirical evidence supporting the theoretical notion that abstract or internalized attitudes translate directly into subtle, yet measurable, behavioral outcomes. The seemingly minor act of mailing a letter--a voluntary effort requiring minimal cost and time--is understood as a reliable proxy for greater underlying support, solidarity, and willingness to engage with a cause or group. This confirmation of the attitude-behavior link, tested rigorously in public settings across diverse populations, has had a lasting impact on how social psychologists design field studies intended to gauge public response to controversial or polarizing social issues, reinforcing the critical understanding that behavior, even in its most minimal and spontaneous form, is genuinely reflective of deeper ideological commitment.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its ingenious design and widespread application, the Lost Letter Procedure is subject to significant methodological limitations and ongoing scholarly debate. The primary criticism centers on the inherent ambiguity of the dependent variable. While a low recovery rate for a specific recipient group is commonly interpreted as an indicator of negative sentiment or hostility, researchers cannot definitively ascertain the precise reason why a letter was not mailed. Possible confounding factors that skew interpretation include simple forgetfulness, the finder being distracted or preoccupied, the finder assuming another person would retrieve or mail the letter, or, critically, the finder intentionally disposing of the letter due to indifference or animosity toward the recipient organization. Consequently, interpreting the absence of a response (the failure to mail) requires extremely careful contextualization and cannot be attributed solely to negative attitudes without additional supporting data.

Ethical scrutiny also figures prominently among the criticisms of the procedure. Although generally considered low-risk, the procedure necessarily involves the covert observation of public behavior, thereby raising fundamental questions about informed consent and the autonomy of the participants. Moreover, there is a risk of misapplication; researchers must carefully consider the potential for manipulation if the procedure were used to deliberately target or discredit specific groups through fabricated data or misleading addresses. Modern institutional review boards (IRBs) now rigorously scrutinize studies employing the Lost Letter Procedure to ensure adherence to ethical principles, including minimizing public distress, maximizing anonymity, and maintaining absolute transparency in data collection and handling. A final, practical limitation is the relatively low statistical power inherent in the design compared to large-scale, controlled surveys; the measured recovery rate must often show a substantial and statistically significant difference between recipient groups to draw robust, causal conclusions about ideological preference.

7. Further Reading

[Lost-letter technique \(Wikipedia\)](#)

Milgram, S., Mann, L., & Harter, S. (1965). The lost-letter technique: A method of measuring group attitudes. Public Opinion Quarterly, 29(3), 430-437.

Psychology Dictionary: LOST LETTER PROCEDURE

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