

# TURNING CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES INTO RESEARCH: A REPLICATION OF THE LOST-LETTER STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*What began as an idea for an undergraduate psychology class activity, intended to increase understanding of social influence, became a replication of an early social psychology study. It also offered the students a unique opportunity to learn about research by jointly participating in a small group study of their own. The AUT School of Education Conference presentation gave me an opportunity to showcase the methods and outcomes of that classroom activity as a novel means of engagement in the subject for students, as well as the publication opportunities arising from the activity/study.*

## BACKGROUND ON SOCIAL INFLUENCE RESEARCH

In 1960, the social psychologist, Stanley Milgram, developed what he called the “lost letter” study as a novel means of measuring social attitudes. He addressed 100 postage-paid envelopes to one of two fictitious groups: half were addressed to *The Friends of the*

*Nazi Party*, and the other half to *Medical Research Associates* (both had the same post-office box address) (Milgram, Mann, & Harter, 1965). He proceeded to “lose” the envelopes, by dropping them in various locations throughout the Boston, Massachusetts area. He then waited to see how many of each, upon being found by the average citizen, would be helped on its way. As Milgram expected, significantly fewer of the envelopes addressed to the *Friends of the Nazi Party* were forwarded on, reflecting what Milgram perceived as a broad negative social attitude toward Nazis at that time in history.

#### THE CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

For three years running, students enrolled in paper 566508—*Social Psychology* have participated in a replication of this early study. In each year’s class, the parameters of the study were the same, with the design of the in-class activity/study modified slightly from the original research. For instance, in Milgram’s original study, there were only two conditions: the negative address (i.e., *Friends of the Nazi Party*) and the neutral address to the research institute. In our replication of his study, I included a third condition—that of a positive address. As such, there are three addressee conditions:

- Positive condition = *The Random Acts of Kindness Society*
- Neutral condition = *John Smith*
- Negative condition = [*chosen by the students each year*]

For the negative address, the students were placed in small groups where they discussed what they felt would be a modern-equivalent of *The Friends of the Nazi Party*. The entire class would then rate and rank the choices, ultimately choosing that year’s negative organization. The neutral and positive conditions were always as above for each replication—only the negative group changed. For the last three years, they were:

- 2011 = *The Anti-All Blacks Association*
- 2010 = *The Whale Meat Wholesalers*
- 2009 = *The Paedophile Network*

In light of Milgram's findings that fewer people will facilitate the delivery of the negative condition (reflecting what Milgram believed was a *negative* social attitude), inclusion of a third positive condition was intended to test whether *positive* social attitudes could be equally assessed. If so, more envelopes to the *Random Acts of Kindness Society* would be expected, relative to both other conditions. It might also be postulated that the lost-letter technique is measuring prosocial behaviour; that people, upon finding the letters, are helping the unknown sender (NOTE: no return addresses were included on the envelopes), by sending the letter on its way. In this case, the total number of envelopes being returned, relative to the total "lost", is the data to be considered.

#### PLANNED PUBLICATIONS

In this era of "publish or perish", we academics must continually watch for—and/or actively seek out—research and publication opportunities. The classroom is a logical place to look for ideas, given the preponderance of time spent there! In light of the success of this classroom activity, two publication ideas emerged. One involves the actual replication of the Milgram study; the second involves the value of the exercise for students and their learning of social influence and research methods. Each is discussed in more detail below.

Article 1: A New Zealand replication

For this planned publication, the idea is to focus on the actual replication of the study, instead of the classroom exercise. In this way, the students are co-researchers on the study, and each year that the experiment is conducted is a repeated replication. As such, we have three year's worth of data to consider for this paper. The intended journal is one related to Social Psychology as a discipline, with a readership of other social psychologists who might be interested in social attitudes, helping behaviour, Stanley Milgram or simply cross-cultural variations on psychological constructs.

Background will be on the original Stanley Milgram "Lost Letter" study (Milgram et al., 1965), validation studies (Georgoff, Hersker, & Murdick, 1972; Shotland, Berger, & Forsythe, 1970; Wicker, 1969), and other research to use this technique (e.g., Ahmen, 2010; Bridges, Anzalone, Ryan, & Anzalone, 2002; Deaux, 1974; Fessler, 2009; Witte, Smith & Joiner, 2010), including the related outcomes and conclusions drawn. The background considers the American post-WWII context in which Milgram placed his study, as contrasted with Auckland, New Zealand in the new millennium. The changed socio-historical framework required altering the "negative condition" to better elicit the same negative social response that Milgram believed the *Friends of the Nazi Party* would evoke in the people of Boston, Massachusetts in the 1960s. Inclusion of the added "positive condition" will need theoretical and methodological consideration in the manuscript, as do a host of other "modern" aspects not mentioned by Milgram in his original publication, briefly discussed below.

Firstly, envelopes here in New Zealand seal with self-adhesive strips that can be opened and resealed. This raised the question of what to do if a person was motivated to open the envelope.<sup>1</sup>

Milgram did not appear to consider this issue in his early publications. We also reasoned that something needed to be placed inside the envelopes; otherwise, upon finding an empty envelope, the person might choose to not continue the letter onward based purely on the fact that the envelope held nothing.

Secondly, in light of the above issue (and the fact that without paper folded and placed inside, one can tell that the envelopes are empty), thought needed to go into *what* to place inside of the envelopes. Given that the negative addressee could potentially elicit strong responses that could possibly sway the finder to open the “offending” letter (and that general curiosity could lead anyone to open any of the letters), we included a mass-copied letter on AUT letterhead, asking for a brochure from the organization. In this way, the letter itself was fairly neutral, minimizing potential influence, and contact details could be ascertained in the event that the finder *did* feel the need to make contact.

Finally, the question arose of whether Milgram’s envelopes might have incited people to act on their negative attitude toward the *Friends of the Nazi Party*—an issue not considered in Milgram’s initial publications. This line of inquiry emerged in the first year,

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<sup>1</sup> In New Zealand, as in most countries, it is against the law to open mail addressed to another person. This applies even if the mail is found lying on the ground, as would be the case in this experiment. Nonetheless, we felt that such a law would not preclude a person from succumbing to their curiosity and opening the letter, given that it *was* just lying on the ground.

only *after* the envelopes addressed to the *Paedophile Network* were sent out to be “lost”, when just such a situation occurred.

Fortunately, we had already grappled with the above two issues, and so on the two separate occasions when the “finders” opened the letters, they found my contact details and phoned me. I was able to assure them that no such *Paedophile Network* existed, and proceeded to explain to them the nature of the study. (I also instructed them to simply discard the envelopes, since at that stage I could no longer include the envelopes in the data.) However, both persons (a man and a woman) indicated that they had considered phoning the police first, but then chose to open the mail. This unexpected outcome forced us to consider that long-standing issue in social psychology, of whether social attitudes will result in commensurate actions. It also meant we would need to carefully consider the nature of the negative addressee in the future, to ensure that the implied actions of the fictitious organization were neither illegal nor ambiguous.

### Article 2: Students learn by doing

The second feature of this classroom activity was the belief that by actually undertaking a small social psychology study (e.g., Merrill, 2002), the students would gain a better understanding of the central concepts of the study—namely social influence, attitudes, and (possibly) prosocial behaviour. They had the added benefit of also learning more about scientific methods of inquiry and the use of quantitative research designs. Therefore, the planned publication for this portion of the class exercise is the *Teaching in Psychology* journal.

The “data” for this project would not be the actual outcomes (i.e., number or type of envelopes) from the replicated study, but rather the *feedback* from the students on their engagement in this project. A survey was given to the cohort of students in each

year's class who participated in the replication, with questions on their amount of learning and level of enjoyment; and questions related to their anticipated outcomes—to measure the depth of their understanding of the material.

However, an unforeseen issue has complicated this particular publication—the ethics of utilising student feedback from the classroom activity as data on their engagement in the activity. For that to happen, ethical approval would have needed to be obtained *prior* to surveying the students. In light of that fact, the survey answers cannot be used as data. On the other hand, once the social psychology students have completed this paper and are no longer students of mine, they can be invited to discuss these aspects *after-the-fact*. There are a host of limitations with this for the previous 2009 and 2010 courses, not the least of which is the extended delay from the time they undertook the project. The 2011 cohort may be suitable to interview, once ethical approval is obtained. Using, for instance, SurveyMonkey, the entire class can be assessed, or a smaller group of student can be invited back for a focus group on the topic.

All of this has led to the possibility of a third paper to emerge as a result of undertaking this classroom project: The ethics of doing research *with* versus *on* students, and what constitutes “data” in such instances. During the presentation given at the *AUT School of Education Conference*, on which this working paper is based, it was this very issue that monopolized the post-presentation discussions, with some attendees questioning (from an ethical perspective) the students' roles in replications, and others voicing strong support for the right/need to be able to utilize the student comments for research. This tension seems to resonate strongly with many academics that are struggling to find time to engage in—and publish—more regularly. I suspect, however, that the issues will not be easily resolved.

## SUMMARY

This working paper describes some of the content from a presentation given at the 2011 *AUT School of Education Conference*. In addition to offering further background to the classroom exercises, the paper discusses the planned publications expected to result from the project. It is hoped that in sharing this information, other academics might see value in the idea of students jointly participating in small classroom research projects, and might look for related opportunities to publish from classroom innovations in teaching and research.

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