

PERCEIVED SIMILARITY AND THIRD-PERSON EFFECT: MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE SHOOTING INCIDENT AT VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors compared the perceptions of Korean Americans, Koreans in the US, and Koreans in Korea, of the media coverage of the fatal shooting of 32 people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in April 2007. This comparison was based on the third-person effect according to which people perceive media coverage to have a greater influence on others than on themselves. Results showed that perception of individuals in the participant groups was that the media coverage had a greater influence on the Korean public in Korea (comparison group) than on themselves in terms of generating negative feelings about Korean Americans and Americans (object groups). In addition, the more that Korean Americans perceived themselves to be similar to the Korean public in Korea, the more they overestimated the influence of the media on the Korean public in Korea.

Full Text

Headnote

We compared the perceptions of Korean Americans, Koreans in the US, and Koreans in Korea, of the media coverage of the fatal shooting of 32 people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in April 2007. This comparison was based on the third-person effect, according to which people perceive media coverage to have a greater influence on others than on themselves. Results showed that perception of individuals in the participant groups was that the media coverage had a greater influence on the Korean public in Korea (comparison group) than on themselves in terms of generating negative feelings about Korean Americans and Americans (object groups). In addition, the more that Korean Americans perceived themselves to be similar to the Korean public in Korea, the more they overestimated the influence of the media on the Korean public in Korea.

Keywords: third-person effect, Koreans, Korean Americans, perceived similarity, media coverage, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University shooting incident.

On April 16, 2007, a college student shot and killed 32 people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in the US, generating a great deal of national and international media coverage. In view of the fact that most previous shootings at schools in the US had been carried out by white Americans (Newman & Fox, 2009), the perpetrator's Korean ethnicity was a surprise, especially to Korean communities both in the US and in South Korea. Some of the media coverage was focused on why the perpetrator, who had grown up in the US, had developed violent tendencies, and on how this incident would affect the view of the Korean public in Korea about Korean Americans and Americans in general.

In the current study we focused on three aspects of media influence perception: (a) the participant group who perceives media influence, (b) the comparison group whose opinions are supposedly influenced by the media's presentation of information, and (c) the object group about whom the comparison group forms opinions.

We investigated whether or not Korean Americans (KA), Koreans living in the US (KU), and the Korean public in Korea (K) would perceive media influence as affecting others more than themselves. We examined (a) the third-person effect (TPE) with the Korean public in Korea as the comparison group, that is, the others on whom the media may have an effect, and (b) the extent to which media coverage of the incident would generate negative feelings toward the two object groups (Korean Americans and Americans) among KA, KU, and K.

Perceived Media Influence in the Shooting Incident

The two outcomes of media influence were negative feelings toward the two object groups. First, because media coverage of the perpetrator and the shooting incident may have generated negative feelings toward Korean Americans, individuals in the participant groups may have exhibited self-enhancement by believing that they themselves were fair-minded, but that the comparison group would have been negatively influenced by media coverage of the incident. Individuals may have perceived that the media coverage did not contain any information that would cause negative feelings toward the group to which the perpetrator was perceived to belong (i.e., Korean Americans). However, they may have believed that, because the comparison group was susceptible to misinterpreting the media content of the incident, they developed negative feelings toward Korean Americans. Individuals may also have felt that the comparison group, by associating the perpetrator with other members of his social group, transferred negative feelings they had about the perpetrator to Korean Americans in general.

Second, individuals in the participant groups may have perceived that the Korean public in Korea blamed American society for making the perpetrator feel isolated and becoming violent because of this isolation. As researchers of group-based emotion and cognition have shown (Smith, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), ethnic Koreans may have exhibited attribution biases in relation to the shooting incident at the polytechnic/university in Virginia. Given that, owing to their shared ethnicity, ethnic Koreans would have perceived the perpetrator as an ingroup member and would have been less likely to attribute the cause of the incident to the perpetrator than to other external causes, such as lax gun control or lack of attention from school authorities. In sum, we expected the three participant groups to exhibit TPE in relation to negative feelings toward each object group as a result of media coverage, using the Korean public in Korea as the comparison group. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The three participant groups will perceive greater media effects on the comparison group than on themselves through media coverage, generating negative feelings toward both the object groups.

The three participant groups may have exhibited differing levels of TPE perception with regard to the shooting incident. It is likely that K would have felt that there was less social distance between themselves and the comparison group than there was between others and the comparison group, because they would have more immediate contact with the Korean public in Korea and they were located at a greater geographical distance from the US. As social distance increases between individuals and the comparison group, this may lead to increased TPE with regard to negative feelings about the object groups. Thus, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: TPE will be greater among KA and KU than among K, in relation to negative feelings toward the object group of Korean Americans.

Hypothesis 2b: TPE will be greater among KA and KU than among K, in relation to negative feelings toward the object group of Americans.

Perceived Similarity to the Comparison Group and the Object Groups

In general, perceived similarity to a particular group can lead individuals to consider media as having a similar amount of influence on those individuals and on the particular group. In this study, we reasoned that individuals in the participant groups might vary in the extent to which they perceived themselves to be similar to each of the three groups. For instance, some KU might perceive themselves to be more similar to KA than to K. Previous researchers have shown that perceived similarity is a factor that affects the degree of TPE (Andsager & White, 2007; Reid & Hogg, 2005).

Because participants may have had different views about media influence on the Korean public in Korea with regard to negative feelings about Korean Americans and Americans, it was possible that the relationship between perceived similarity and TPE would be stronger among individuals from a certain group, depending on the group to which the perceived similarity and TPE pertained. For example, the effect on TPE of an individual's perceived similarity to the Korean public in Korea, with regard to the perception of Korean Americans may be weaker among KA than among K. When TPE involves the media portrayal of the perpetrator, resulting in negative feelings toward Korean Americans, the more KA perceive themselves to be similar to the Korean public in Korea, and the more likely they are to believe that the Korean public in Korea will be influenced less by the media. This perception could possibly be related to the belief of KA that the Korean public in Korea is sympathetic to Korean Americans and impervious to their treatment in the media.

On the other hand, the effect on TPE of perceived similarity to Americans may be stronger among KA than among K. KA who perceive themselves to be similar to Americans may feel that the Korean public in Korea is more easily influenced by the media because they are not sufficiently familiar with American culture to form an accurate interpretation of the media portrayal of the perpetrator and the incident. Accordingly, KA who perceive themselves to be similar to Americans, may believe that the influence of the media on the Korean public in Korea is greater than it is on themselves with regard to negative feelings about Americans.

Because perceived similarity can be assessed for the comparison group and the two object groups, and because we had three participant groups to compare in this study, we posed two research questions in a more general form, rather than listing all the different combinations of the interaction effects of perceived similarity and participant groups on TPE.

Research Question 1a: Will KA and KU differ from K in terms of how perceived similarity to the Korean public in Korea is related to the degree of TPE with regard to negative feelings toward Korean Americans?

Research Question 1b: Will KA and KU differ from K in terms of how perceived similarity to Korean Americans is related to the degree of TPE with regard to negative feelings toward Korean Americans?

Research Question 2a: Will KA and KU differ from K in terms of how perceived similarity to the Korean public in Korea is related to the degree of TPE with regard to negative feelings toward Americans?

Research Question 2b: Will KA and KU differ from K in terms of how perceived similarity to Americans is related to the degree of TPE with regard to negative feelings toward Americans?

Method

Participants

After the Institutional Review Board at Michigan State University in the US approved this research on April 20, 2007, we collected data from April 21 to 26 in the US and South Korea, using both online and paper-and-pencil survey questionnaires. Participants identified themselves as Korean citizens or American citizens, and as students or nonstudents.

Of the 312 K participants (57.1% women), 62.8% were students and 37.2% were adults in paid employment. Their ages ranged from 18 to 48 years ($M = 24.95$, $SD = 4.69$). Of the 57 KA participants (66.7% women), 24 were U.S. citizens and 33 were permanent residents. Their ages ranged from 21 to 65 years ($M = 35.81$, $SD = 9.18$), and they had resided in the US for an average of 10.36 years ($SD = 5.5$). Of the 137 KU participants (64.2% women), 28.5% were students, and 71.5% were adults in paid employment or their spouses. On average, they had resided in the US for 4.03 years ($SD = 2.84$). Their ages ranged from 21 to 50 years ($M = 31.82$, $SD = 4.72$).

Procedure and Measures

We asked participants to choose to complete either the Korean or English version of the questionnaire, both of which had previously been checked by bilingual speakers of English and Korean for equivalence in meaning using backtranslation. We gave a brief introduction: "This survey is about your opinions on the shooting incident that took place at Virginia Tech in the USA on April 16th. The shooter, Cho Seung-Hui, killed 32 people on campus and shot himself." All items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much.

Perceived similarity. The extent to which participants perceived themselves to be similar to each of the three groups (Koreans living in Korea, Korean Americans, and Koreans living in the US), was measured with one item: "How similar are you to an average Korean living in Korea in terms of general attitudes, aspirations, and outlook on life?"

Third-person effect in relation to negative feelings toward Korean Americans. TPE was measured with two items: "The media coverage of the incident affects the Korean public in Korea (me) such that they (I) get negative feelings toward Korean Americans." The TPE scores were obtained by subtracting the responses to the first item from the responses to the second item.

Third-person effect in relation to negative feelings toward Americans. Participants responded to two items: "The media coverage of the incident affects the Korean public in Korea (me) such that they (I) get negative feelings toward Americans." The TPE scores were calculated by subtracting the responses to the first item from the responses to the second item.

Results

With regard to Hypothesis 1, a 3 (participant groups: K, KU, and KA) \times 2 (media influence target: self and the comparison group) \times 2 (object groups: Americans and Korean Americans) mixed analysis of variance was conducted with the media influence target and object group as the within-subject factors. The main effect for the media influence target was significant, $F(1, 476) = 67.75$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$. Individuals perceived greater media influence on the Korean public in Korea ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.84$) than on themselves ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.89$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test Hypothesis 2 and to examine the possible interaction effects we had set out in the research questions. The dependent variable was media influence on the Korean public in Korea rather than on the self. Two dummy variables were used for the independent variables to categorize the three participant groups. The first one (labeled KA) included K coded as 0 (i.e., the reference group) and KA coded as 1. The second one (labeled KU) coded K as 0 and KU as 1. As continuous variables, perceived similarities were mean centered before being multiplied with the dummy variables to test the interactions. In terms of multicollinearity, the variance inflation factor ranged from 1.09 to 2.20.

With regard to Hypothesis 2a, the dummy variable labeled KA was not significant. However, the dummy variable labeled KU was significant. Thus, Hypothesis 2a was partially supported in that the extent to which participants perceived a greater media effect on the Korean public in Korea than on themselves was greater among KU ($M = 0.79$, $SD = 1.24$) than among K ($M = 0.39$, $SD = 0.93$).

With regard to Research Question 1a, the interaction between the dummy variable labeled KU and their perceived similarity to the Korean public in Korea was not significant. However, the interaction between the dummy variable labeled KA and their perceived similarity to the Korean public in Korea was significant. To determine the significance of this interaction, simple slopes regression analyses (cf., Aiken & West, 1991) were conducted and the results showed that as perceived similarity to the Korean public in Korea increased, the amount of TPE increased among KA, $b = .40$, $p = .03$.

With regard to Research Question 1b, the interaction between the dummy variable labeled KA and their perceived similarity to Korean Americans was not significant (see Table 1). On the other hand, the interaction between the dummy variable labeled KU and their perceived similarity to Korean Americans was significant. The simple slopes analysis result revealed that perceived similarity to Korean Americans was not significantly related to the degree of TPE among K ($b = -0.02$, $p = .81$), whereas perceived similarity to Korean Americans was negatively related to the amount of TPE among KU ($b = -0.29$, $p = .02$). These results indicate that TPE decreased for KU as they felt more similar to Korean Americans (i.e., the object group of Korean Americans), but the same decrease did not occur among K.

With regard to Hypothesis 2b, the dummy variable labeled KA was significant (see Table 1). In addition, the dummy variable labeled KU was significant. Thus, Hypothesis 2b was supported in that the extent to which participants perceived a greater media effect on the Korean public in Korea than on themselves was greater among KA ($M = 0.41$, $SD = 1.17$) and KU ($M = 0.32$, $SD = 1.01$) than it was among K ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.91$).

With regard to Research Questions 2a and 2b, overall, as shown in Table 1, the predictors in the second block did not significantly contribute to TPE, indicating that the relationship between perceived similarity and TPE did not vary across the three participant groups.

Discussion

We examined TPE in the context of an incident that occurred in 2007 at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, in which a Korean student shot and killed 32 people before taking his own life. We investigated whether or not individuals' social-group type and their perceived similarity to each of three social groups were related to TPE. Because the Korean public in Korea was specified as the comparison group, we focused on three participant groups who were related to the Korean public in Korea and who were more likely to be aware of media coverage in Korea than were non-Koreans. In general, the findings showed that the three groups perceived that the influence of the media on the Korean public in Korea was greater than the influence on themselves. TPE was salient (Gunther & Mundy, 1993) because the media coverage had negative consequences.

Media Influence

The findings showed that K perceived greater media influence concerning others' negative feelings toward Americans than toward Korean Americans, whereas KA and KU had the opposite perception. Location, which is a possible factor in the increase of TPE (Brosius & Engel, 1996), may be a possible explanation. K may have focused more on the fact that the incident occurred in the US where the perpetrator lived, and may have perceived that he was influenced by American culture. Also, the perpetrator's move to the US as an 8-year-old may have led K to form an opinion about why he became violent.

On the other hand, KA and KU may have focused more on the implications for the public's impression of Korean Americans as a group, because this was the group to which the perpetrator belonged (cf., Knoblock-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008). Living in the US may have led these two groups to focus more on the perpetrator's ethnicity, because, for these groups, this may have been the salient characteristic that distinguished this incident from other shootings at schools in the US (cf., Newman & Fox, 2009). Future researchers need to examine whether or not individuals from different social groups absorb different amounts of media influence according to the attention given to aspects of an incident.

In terms of media influence on the self, individuals perceived greater influence regarding others' negative feelings toward Americans than toward Korean Americans. However, with regard to media influence on the Korean public in Korea, individuals perceived greater influence regarding others' negative feelings toward Korean Americans than toward Americans. This finding may imply that the relationship between the self and Americans (or Korean Americans) could differ from the relationship between the comparison group and Americans (or Korean Americans). How individuals think about Americans and Korean Americans may differ from how individuals assume that the Korean public in Korea thinks about Americans and Korean Americans. Because we did not examine which specific

aspects of the incident the participants had focused on when responding to the survey, we can only speculate on their focus. We surmised that individuals may have considered that the Korean public in Korea focused more on the minor details of the incident (e.g., the perpetrator being a Korean American), whereas the individuals themselves focused more on the more general issue of violence in the United States.

In addition, we found that KU exhibited a greater degree of TPE than did K. This could have been because of their geographical distance from Korea, in that, compared to the K group, KU may have considered the Korean public in Korea to be less of an ingroup. Although the three groups who took part in our study were of the same ethnicity, the fact that the incident occurred in the US may have caused the geographical distance to become a dimension affecting TPE perception.

Perceived Similarity to the Comparison Group

As KA felt more similar than others did to the comparison group, they overestimated media influence on the Korean public in Korea, believing that media coverage would generate negative feelings about Korean Americans. These results were contrary to our expectation. An explanation may be that the perceived similarity might have indicated fondness of KA for, or their connections with, the Korean public in Korea. Many participants were born in Korea and came to the US as adults. The way we measured TPE in this study might not have indicated that others were more affected by media influence. Instead, TPE might have indicated the worries of the KA group about their image.

This finding has two possible implications. The first is that the assessment by the KA of media influence on the Korean public in Korea may be followed by their concerns about the consequences of that presumed influence. Gunther and Storey (2003) pointed out in their general model of presumed influence, which includes TPE as a special case, that "people perceive some influence of a message on others and then react to that perception of influence" (p. 201). Our finding in this study may have a better fit with the general model of presumed influence than with the traditional TPE conceptualization. A weakness in existing TPE research is that, when participants are asked about media influence in general terms, there is no way of knowing what kinds of media influence the participants are considering (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002). In our study, the measurement items for TPE and media influence were not specific enough to discern the kinds of influence KA were thinking of when they responded to the items in our survey, and whether or not the reaction of the KA group to that perception of influence pertained to concern about their image among the Korean public in Korea. In future research, it may be necessary to specify the relationships among individuals, a comparison group, and the type of media coverage of the individuals' social group.

The second possibility is that the positive relationships among perceived similarity, the comparison group, and TPE may suggest the individuals' psychological stance toward, or motivational factors related to, the comparison group. Even when some type of social, physical, or geographical distance exists between individuals and a comparison group, perceived similarity can represent psychological closeness with the comparison group. However, unique characteristics of the relationship between individuals and the comparison group may potentially affect the direction of the effects of perceived similarity on TPE and presumed influence.

Perceived Similarity to the Object Groups

Overall, perceived similarity to the object groups of Korean Americans and Americans did not affect TPE related to others' negative feelings toward them. However, compared to K, KU showed that, as they felt more similar to the object group of Korean Americans, they exhibited less TPE related to others' negative feelings toward Korean Americans. An interpretation of this finding may involve considering whether or not KU viewed the perpetrator as a typical Korean American. KU with higher levels of perceived similarity to Korean Americans may be less likely to view media coverage as generating negative feelings specifically toward Korean Americans. Thus, it is possible that KU are not necessarily denying a greater media influence on the Korean public in Korea than on themselves, but they may not perceive the perpetrator as reflecting Korean Americans negatively.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation in our study was the unequal number of participants in each group. Because of difficulty in locating and contacting KA in a short timeframe for data collection, the number of KA was smaller than the number of participants in other groups. This may limit the generalizability of the current findings. A second limitation is that we used just one item to measure individuals' perceived similarity to each of the three social groups. However, the questionnaire wording for the similarity measure had reasonable face validity, and some previous researchers have also used single items for similar purposes with no major validity problems (e.g., Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; Reid & Hogg, 2005). In addition, we used single items rather than a lengthy scale for each of the three social groups because we needed to expedite data collection. Nevertheless, future researchers could use well-validated multiple items for measuring perceived similarities.

Finally, previous researchers have shown that cross-national similarities as well as differences existed in media coverage of the shooting incident that was the topic of our study (Kwon & Moon, 2009; Lee, Shim, & Shim, 2008). Characteristics of the media coverage in Korea and the US might have affected Koreans in those countries differently (cf., Park, Yun, Choi, & Lee, 2012). Future researchers of major international stories may need to examine simultaneously both the media coverage characteristics of each nation and people's responses to that media coverage in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of media influence.

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