The Third Person Effect: A Critical Review and Synthesis

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THEORETICAL INTEGRATION ESSAY

The Third-Person Effect:
A Critical Review and Synthesis

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This paper reviews research on the third-person effect—the perception that communications exert a stronger effect on others than on oneself. It is concluded that the third-person effect is a reliable and persistent phenomenon that emerges across variations in question order, format, and wording. The effect is also more situationally specific than originally believed, as illustrated by evidence of first-person effects in response to socially desirable messages. Self-enhancement biases, although not the only processes that underlie the effect, provide a parsimonious explanation of message-desirability results. Other delimiting conditions such as social distance are critically reviewed, evidence for behavioral effects is discussed, and methodological shortcomings are noted. Six directions for research are articulated.

In February 1998 *The New York Times* reported the findings of a CBS News poll that probed whether people believed that other people were more interested in news reports of President Clinton's sex life than they were. Only 7% of respondents indicated that they were fascinated by news stories on Clinton's sex life; 37% said that they were mildly curious; and 50% claimed that they were not interested at all. In what reporter Richard L. Berke (1998) appropriately called "a whammy," respondents reacted much differently when asked to judge most people's interest in the stories. Without appearing to bat the empirical equivalent of an eyelash, 25% of the same sample said most people were fascinated, 49% indicated most people were mildly curious, and only 18% said most people were not interested in the stories.

Ten months later, in what seemed to be a textbook illustration of Davison's (1983) assertion that media effects are due to the actions of those who anticipate reactions on the part of third persons, Arab-American leaders vehemently protested Edward Zwick's suspense thriller, *The Siege,* shortly after the movie appeared in theaters in November 1998. Writing in *The New York Times,* Ibrahim Hooper (1998) argued that "images, characters, and juxtapositions give the impression that every Muslim student, business owner and activist should be considered a possible threat" (p. 31). What provoked verbal protests such as Hooper's was not evidence that the movie actually incited attacks against American Muslims, but instead the belief that the movie's stereotyped portrayals of Muslims as terrorists would increase prejudice among third persons.

Better anecdotal support for the third-person effect (TPE) would be difficult to find.[1] The previous examples also illustrate a fundamental complexity of the effect, an elusiveness that has frustrated and fascinated researchers since the publication of Davison's (1983) article. Questions abound. Did respondents in the CBS poll project their own lascivious interest in the scandal onto others? Were they unwilling to admit to being influenced personally because such an admission would reflect negatively on themselves? Or did they honestly believe most people were more interested in scandal news than they were, perhaps because of round-the-clock news coverage (Perloff, 1998a)? In the case of *The Siege,* exactly why did American Muslims assume that a mere movie would have such striking effects on the public? Did their strong ethnic identification lead them to contrast the public with themselves and thus view the public as an out-group that would be susceptible to media influence (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995)? Did deeply held beliefs about media bias color their perception of the movie, leading them to infer that the movie's content was primarily hostile (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994)?

The TPE, brainchild of Davison in 1983 and now a venerable member of the family of concepts that mass communication scholars regularly address, is the focus of this integrative review article. Over 45 published articles—and dozens of convention papers—have examined components of the TPE hypothesis. The concept has stimulated researchers in mass communication, social psychology, political psychology, and public opinion; contains strong theoretical implications for the psychology of political communication and persuasion (Glynn, Ostman, & McDonald, 1995; Mutz, 1994; White, 1997); and redounds with implications for policymaking in areas ranging from censorship to elite political decision making (Baughman, 1989; Perloff, 1996). Yet as research has flourished, a series of criticisms and questions about the meaning and strength of the effect have surfaced, pointing out the need for a critical review of research on this elusive, but persistent, phenomenon.
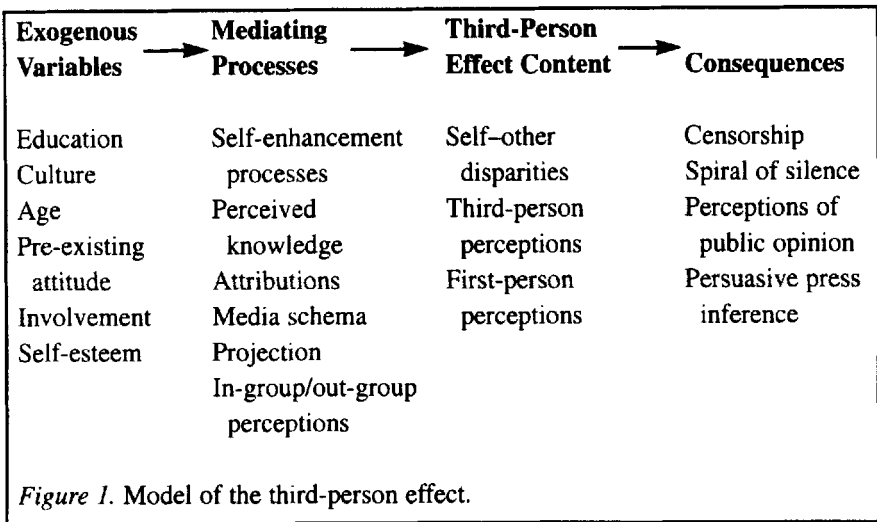
CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

The contrast between self and other is arguably the most fundamental duality of Western thought. A perceptual outgrowth of the time-honored subject–object dichotomy, TPE is the belief that communications exert a stronger impact on others than on the self. As Davison (1983) noted, individuals exposed to a mediated message typically believe that the message will not have its greatest impact "on 'me' [the first person] or 'you,' [the second person], but on 'them'— the third persons" (p. 3; bracketed phrases added). Davison also suggested that whatever effects messages have on attitudes and behaviors are not due to the direct persuasive impacts of the messages themselves. Instead, he maintained, effects are due to the actions of those who anticipate some reaction on the part of others (the third persons) and behave differently as a result. This is frequently referred to as the behavioral component of the TPE. A key assumption of the TPE is that perceptions of media effects on the self and others are distinct entities, that is, individuals can and do separate out in their minds perceptions of communication effects on others and the self.

It is important to emphasize that the TPE is not a theory of public opinion, but rather a hypothesis or series of assertions about perceptions of public opinion and their effects. Furthermore, the construct is a relational one, focusing not monadically on an individual-level variable but on the relationship between, specifically the connection between perceptions of self and perceptions of others. The key element is the "disconnect" between perceptions of self and others. Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, and Rosenfeld (1991) spoke for most researchers (though not all at all times; see Davison, 1983, p. 9; Gunther, 1991, pp. 368-369) when they remarked that the TPE is a perceptual distortion. Most individuals, they point out, are willing to accept the "logical inconsistency" implicit in the notion that the media influence others more than themselves.

ISSUES SURROUNDING THE EFFECT

Third-person effect research has flourished over the past decade, so much so that two scholars observed that it "is emerging as a major media-effects approach" (Salwen & Driscoll, 1997, p. 61). With the foundations for the effect empirically established, the bulk of recent research has focused on probing underlying processes, contingent conditions, and consequences of the TPE (See Figure 1).

Exogenous Variables	Mediating Processes	Third-Person Effect Content	Consequences
Education	Self-enhancement	Self–other	Censorship
Culture	processes	disparities	Spiral of silence
Age	Perceived	Third-person	Perceptions of
Pre-existing	knowledge	perceptions	public opinion
attitude	Attributions	First-person	Persuasive press
Involvement	Media schema	perceptions	inference
Self-esteem	Projection		
	In-group/out-group		
	perceptions		

Figure 1. Model of the third-person effect.

A systematic review of published articles, conducted as part of this review, reveals that every paper that has directly tested the TPE has found support for the predicted discrepancy between estimates of media effects on self and others.[2] In the first meta-analysis of the TPE, Paul, Salwen, and DuPagne (1999) reported that the overall effect size for the perceptual component of the TPE weighted by sample size is $r = .50$. The effect size is substantial, when compared with others obtained in mass communication, such as influences of pornography on aggression ($r = .13$; Allen, D'Alessio, & Brezgel, 1995).

With the results of Paul et al.'s (1999) analysis in mind, it is clear that there is no longer any question about whether a reliable TPE emerges when respondents are asked to judge the impact of communications on others and themselves: It does, and consistently. The issues facing researchers now are more vexing ones: Just what does the TPE mean? What transpires psychologically when people judge that media influence others more than themselves? Is the effect a methodological artifact? If not, is it a rather predictable consequence of people's need to perceive themselves in the best possible light? And to the extent that it is, is the TPE a much more delimited phenomenon than originally believed, one with less intriguing implications for public opinion and political psychology? The next sections of the paper examine these questions, beginning with the issue of measurement.

Is the TPE a Methodological Artifact?

Before discussing measurement-based alternative explanations of the TPE, it is useful to describe the standard ways in which self–other discrepancies are

measured. Third-person effect studies typically expose individuals to an actual message or description of a message. Participants then are asked to estimate effects on self and others. In some studies, respondents are not exposed to a message at all, but instead answer a telephone interviewer's questions about effects of a particular type of media fare.[3] The TPE is typically operationalized as the difference between perceptions of message effects on others and the self. In some cases, separate assessments of third-person perceptions (estimates of influence on others) and first-person perceptions (perceptions of influence on oneself) are made.

Question Order and Format. To what degree can the TPE be explained away by other factors? Several methodologically based alternative explanations have been offered. One view is that the TPE is an artifact of the order in which questions are asked. According to this logic, one reason the effect emerges is that respondents indicate their perceptions of message effects on others prior to indicating their beliefs about effects on the self. A primacy effect may therefore operate in which individuals are willing to acknowledge large effects on the first question, but not on the second. In effect, the argument goes, the media-impact-on-others question skews responses by acting as a strong anchor that influences responses to the second question. However, several studies have counterbalanced questions or tested for order and still found a TPE (Gunther, 1995; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997; Tiedge et al., 1991; although see also David & Johnson, 1998).

A more subtle possibility, advanced by Price and Tewksbury (1996), is that the effect is an artifact of the practice of asking self–other questions in a back-to-back format. Price and Tewksbury argued that this format encourages individuals to contrast responses to a media-effects-on-self question with that of a media-effects-on-others query. Such a contrast effect is purely artificial, the argument goes, and may not occur in a setting where questions are not asked in this fashion. "If the tendency to report less media impact on oneself than on others depends critically upon inducing with the survey instrument an explicit self-versus-others contrast," Price and Tewksbury noted, "then the generality of the effect could well be called into question" (p. 122).

In a carefully crafted experiment, Price and Tewksbury (1996) compared responses from participants asked to make only a single estimate of a media impact (either on others or themselves) with those of participants operating under the standard research procedure, in which they answer both questions (e.g., others-then-self or self-then-others). If the TPE were an artifact of question-contrast effects, then self–other discrepancies should emerge only among participants who

received the back-to-back questions. However, the TPE was obtained not only for two-question (contrast) conditions, but also for single-question conditions in which participants estimated media effects on themselves or others.

The findings from these studies argue against the notion that the TPE is an artifact of question order or format. Unfortunately—or fortunately for those who cherish complexity—order factors cannot be totally eliminated. Price and Tewksbury (1996) reported that question order interacted with political knowledge, such that a negative relationship between knowledge and perceived effects on oneself was obtained when the question about media influence on others preceded one asking about impact on the self. Speculating about this, the investigators suggested that comparisons triggered by the others-then-self question may not be entirely symmetrical to those activated by the self-then-others query, at least in the minds of highly knowledgeable respondents. David and Johnson (1998) reported a question-order effect for outcomes that were high, but not low, in social undesirability.

Question Wording. Respondents in TPE studies are typically asked to estimate the effect of a message on others and themselves (e.g., "What impact did the media have on others/yourself?"). Yet to admit that one has been influenced implies that one is not in control of one's destiny or is a victim of the social environment, both of which are negatively valued characteristics in Western culture (Heine & Lehman, 1995). Putting aside the question of self-enhancement interpretations of the TPE for the present time, the question wording may encourage respondents to estimate larger message effects on others than on the self. As Brosius and Engel (1996), who advanced this argument, perceptively noted, "Mentioning the media as the grammatical subject of the question and referring to the respondent as the object tends to contrast with the respondent's positive image of self" (p. 147).

Brosius and Engel (1996) reasoned that participants would be more willing to acknowledge effects on the self when the phrasing makes the respondent the active subject ("I let myself be influenced by advertising when I go shopping") than when it refers to the respondent in the typically passive fashion ("Advertising influences me when I go shopping."). However, wording differences did not significantly attenuate the TPE, once again demonstrating the robustness of the phenomenon.

What Is the Meaning of the TPE?

A large body of social psychological research has convincingly demonstrated that people are motivated to preserve self-esteem, even to the point of

maintaining unrealistically positive images of themselves compared to others. Weinstein (1980) called this unrealistic optimism; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, and Vredenburg (1995) referred to the tendency to evaluate oneself more positively than others as the "better-than-average effect." Scholars have applied this theory to the TPE, arguing that the effect should hold only under conditions when "perceiving self as less influenced than others would serve both to protect and enhance the ego" (Duck & Mullin, 1995, p. 80; see also Gunther & Thorson, 1992). Hoorens and Ruiter (1996) observed the following:

> If being influenced by the media is perceived as indicative of undesirable traits or of bad luck, being able to resist their influence may be perceived as indicative of being better (off) than others. A reversed third-person effect should occur for messages that are considered desirable to be influenced by. Being influenced by such messages may indeed be seen as an indicator of highly valued characteristics such as openness to innovation, flexibility, or humanity, or of particularly good luck. (p. 601)

The self-enhancement view has been tested by varying three message characteristics: topic, format, and quality.

Message Topic. Six studies have compared the magnitude of TPE for undesirable and desirable messages. Desirable messages have included advice on using seat belts (e.g., Gunther & Mundy, 1993), behaving prosocially (Duck & Mullin, 1995), and traffic safety (Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996). Undesirable messages have encompassed news of a new diet pill that "melts fat away while you sleep" (Gunther & Mundy, 1993), media violence (Duck & Mullin, 1995; Innes & Zeitz, 1988), and extreme right wing political parties (Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996).

Undesirable messages produced greater TPE than desirable messages or topics in four studies (Duck & Mullin, 1995; Gunther & Hwa; 1996; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996), but not in Brosius and Engel (1996) or Innes and Zeitz (1988). Hoorens and Ruiter (1996) and Gunther and Hwa (1996) reported reversed TPE, or first-person effects, for desirable messages. Two other studies also found first-person effects, indicating that respondents perceive that they are more influenced than others by attitude-congruent messages (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998).

Media Formats. Another way to test the self-enhancement interpretation is to examine self–other differences in the effects of different media formats. Researchers have argued that formats that are seen as "not smart to be influenced by" (i.e., product advertisements) should lead to greater TPE than genres that

lack this connotation (PSAs, prosocial campaigns, and news). Support for this hypothesis was obtained by Brosius and Engel (1996), Gunther and Mundy (1993), and Gunther and Thorson (1992), but not Chapin (1999).

Two other studies examined differential perceptions of public service campaigns, although the investigators did not make comparisons with other media formats. Duck and Mullin (1995) found that participants perceived that they were more influenced than others by public service campaigns, with respondents who saw campaigns as desirable admitting to more self-influence. Similarly, Duck, Terry, and Hogg (1995) found that respondents who strongly believed that it was good to be influenced by AIDS advertising perceived that they were more influenced than people in general.

Message Quality. According to Duck, Terry, and Hogg (1995), people should resist seeing themselves as influenced by messages unless the communications are perceived to be of high quality. Duck, Terry, et al. tested this hypothesis in a carefully crafted study of AIDS public service advertisements. They found that participants estimated that they were more influenced than others by high-quality AIDS spots and less affected than others by low-quality ads. The findings held whether message quality was based on ratings of an independent sample of students or participants' own ratings. These findings conform with, and strengthen, those of Gunther and Thorson (1992) and are congenial with those of White (1997), who found that participants assumed that others would be more affected than themselves by a persuasive communication with weak arguments, while believing that they would be more influenced than others by a message with strong arguments.

Synthesis of Findings. Message desirability is a multifaceted construct. It has been conceptualized as personal benefit likelihood, topics judged "not smart to be influenced by," and in terms of congruence with preexisting attitudes. In order to make valid inferences about message desirability effects, we need to be assured that messages researchers deem desirable are seen in this light by participants. Not all studies included manipulation checks or performed internal analyses of participants' perceptions. Thus it is possible that respondents in studies conducted by Brosius and Engel (1996), Chapin (1999), and Innes and Zeitz (1988) did not perceive media content as particularly desirable, hence did not judge that it was smart to be influenced by the content. In certain cases, respondents may have perceived undesirable messages to be more negative than they judged desirable communications to be positive.

In some studies, message desirability was confounded with message topic. To be sure, it is hard to separate out these two variables. However, it is possible that

undesirable topics yielded greater TPE because participants had come to believe, through actual media exposure, that these content areas had strong influences. For example, respondents might have perceived that others were more affected than themselves by violence and sexism (Duck & Mullin, 1995; Innes & Zeitz, 1988) and advertisements (Gunther & Thorson, 1992), not to prop up their self-concepts, but because prior to participating in the study they had come across articles that lamented the strong effects of such negative media content. Having never encountered articles detailing the impact of positive media content, they did not assume others were as affected by desirable messages. However, this interpretation cannot as easily account for the tendency of participants to assume they were not *themselves* influenced by negative media content (see David & Johnson, 1998); nor can it explain away the findings of studies that used novel messages (Duck, Terry, et al., 1995; White, 1997).

It is also possible that constraints of the experimental contexts (i.e., demand characteristics) push participants away from admitting effects of undesirable messages. Respondents might be reluctant to admit to being influenced by undesirable messages in a university environment, which prizes independence of thinking. However, the same individuals might be comfortable admitting that such content influences them if the questions were posed in a nonthreatening environment, such as the privacy of their home, by a friend who permits them to acknowledge that an undesirable message (e.g., violence) might affect them in one domain (e.g., elicit fear about going out at night) but not another (cause them to become physically aggressive).

Although these alternative views suggest we need to be cautious about assuming that self-enhancement mediates all TPE, it does not diminish the utility of the explanation, nor its parsimony in explaining divergent findings. As Duck, Terry, et al. (1995) noted, "When it is deemed preferable to resist persuasion, people see themselves as highly resistant and others as less so. In contrast, when it is acceptable to think of oneself as influenced, people see themselves as quite yielding and others as less so" (p. 323). Helpful as this view is, it raises additional questions. What makes a situation one in which it is "preferable to resist persuasion," and when is it "acceptable to think of oneself as influenced?" Do people consider it acceptable to be influenced just when they perceive potential personal benefits, or also when they sense that the message congeals with their values (in line with what Cohen and Davis found on this score) or when they perceive that agreement is consonant with social norms, or in all these circumstances? At present the best that can be said is that messages will not produce first-person effects unless they are seen as desirable by respondents and are of sufficiently high quality that individuals feel comfortable admitting self-influence.

A Variety of Meanings. Given that there are alternative explanations for some of the self-enhancement findings and that a variety of social psychological processes underlie complex phenomena (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985), it is likely that a variety of mechanisms are at work in the TPE. Different processes undoubtedly work under different conditions and when different motives are salient.

One explanatory mechanism, suggested by Gunther (1991), is the actor–observer attributional error. As observers, individuals underestimate the extent to which others take into account situational factors like source intention, whereas as actors they assume that they are attentive to the impact of these cues. One problem with a strictly attribution interpretation is that it requires a conceptual jump to apply attribution theory to the TPE (Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996). As Hoorens and Ruiter noted, if people believe others are less attentive to situational cues than they are themselves, they should perceive that others are also less influenced by situational factors like the media message. Moreover, actor–observer theory has difficulty explaining why people acknowledge being influenced by desirable messages.

A second view, emphasizing media schema, is that people adhere to simple stereotypes of the audience and buy into a hypodermic needle model of effects (Perloff, 1993). To the degree that individuals believe that the average person is susceptible to media or that the media are all-powerful, they can logically infer that others are more vulnerable to media than themselves. Evidence in favor of this interpretation is limited at present, however (Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997).

A third view of the meaning of the TPE, akin to looking-glass self (Fields & Schuman, 1976) but more psychoanalytic, is that people project negative effects onto others. According to a projection account, people cannot consciously admit that certain content (e.g., pornography) influences them. To avoid having to deal with the discomfort such an admission would cause, they attribute effects to others. Although intuitively plausible and capable of interpreting some of the literature (e.g., Gunther, 1995), the projection view is, of course, notoriously difficult to test. In addition, it assumes people chronically underestimate message effects on themselves; yet under some conditions, respondents accurately judge the effects of messages on their opinions (Gunther, 1991; White, 1997). Moreover, the projection interpretation has difficulty explaining first-person effects, such as those described earlier.

In sum, there are several explanations of the TPE. There is enough support for self-enhancement to suggest that a motive to perceive oneself in the best possible light operates when people make comparisons about media effects on self and

others. Yet even if the TPE emerged only for "undesirable" messages, such a conclusion would not put TPE researchers out of business! Much media content, particularly in the political domain (Patterson, 1993), is negative, and people are predisposed to attach more weight to negative than positive information (Kellermann, 1984). More importantly, as I note in the last section of this article, self-enhancement theories can enrich knowledge of the basic processes by which the TPE operates.

Overestimation Versus Underestimation. One additional aspect of the underlying process issue deserves mention: the question of whether the TPE stems from a psychological distortion. It is logically possible that an individual could be correct in believing that others are influenced more by a message than oneself. To determine the degree to which distortion underlies the TPE, researchers have compared perceptions with actual opinion change or opinions of an equivalent baseline group. These analyses also shed light on whether respondents are overestimating effects on others or underestimating effects on themselves. Only a handful of studies have included such analyses. Three studies offer support for overestimation (Gunther, 1991; Perloff, 1989; Price et al., 1998), with two providing particularly strong evidence that participants accurately perceive message effects on themselves while exaggerating message effects on others (Gunther, 1991; Price et al., 1998). One experiment (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988) offered support for underestimation.

Although it is difficult to see how the TPE could not be rooted in a psychological distortion of some sort, the degree to which it is and the nature of the distortion should be viewed as matters for debate. In the same fashion, although overestimation and underestimation are interwoven because individuals consider their own behaviors when evaluating others (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998) and use prototypes of others when thinking about the self, these processes can, to some degree, be separated out. To the extent that they can, we gain increased insight into the underlying processes—and effects—of self–other disparities.

What is the Nature of Self–Other Comparisons?

In his 1983 article, Davison contended that individuals perceive that messages have their greatest impact on "'them'—the third persons." Davison left it at that, but increasingly researchers have explored the nature of these "third persons," arguing that the nature of the social comparison between self and other depends in important ways on the identity of the hypothetical others. The psychological

relationship between self and comparison other is significant theoretically if it proves to be a delimiting condition for the TPE, that is, another factor on which the strength of the third-person effect hinges.

Research on this issue has centered on what has come to be called the social-distance corollary. According to this notion, the magnitude of the TPE increases as the social distance between self and comparison others increases, or the hypothetical others are defined in larger, broader terms. The greater the perceived social distance between self and others, the easier it is to assume the third persons will fall prey to effects that "I" see through.

Eleven studies have tested the social-distance corollary. In the first demonstration of social-distance effects, Cohen et al. (1988) reported larger TPE as the "other" increased in generality from "other Stanford students" to "other Californians" to "public opinion at large." Of the 10 studies that have tested the social-distance notion since Cohen et al., eight confirmed it (Brosius & Engel, 1996; David & Johnson, 1998; Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; Gibbon & Durkin, 1995; Gunther, 1991; White, 1997), whereas two have not (Cohen & Davis, 1991; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997). However, in one case (McLeod et al., 1997), part of the difficulty stemmed from an inadvertent confounding of social distance with perceived likelihood of exposure to media. One of the comparison groups thought to be more distant from respondents—New York and Los Angeles youth—may reasonably have been believed to have had more exposure to rap music and hence be more receptive to influence.

Synthesis of Findings. The social-distance corollary has received considerable support, indicating that as comparison others become more distant or psychologically removed from the self, the self–other discrepancy increases. Explanations have emphasized downward social comparisons (Duck & Mullin, 1995), the assumption that distant others are part of a negatively evaluated out-group (Duck, Hogg, et al., 1995), and different lay theories about message influence on distant versus close others (Brosius & Engel, 1996; cf. Tyler & Cook, 1984).

Although research in this area has admirably operated from a theoretical bent, it has been constrained by the fuzziness of the social-distance concept. The construct encompasses a host of theoretical processes and consequently has been operationalized in a variety of ways, occasionally problematic. For example, researchers have assumed that "the average person" is a more socially distant comparison other than "other university students," but the former differs from the latter in being a singular (rather than plural) entity and also in tapping a

prototype. In addition, psychological distance between self and comparison others frequently has not been assessed, so it is possible that respondents do not share researchers' perceptions of the increasing generality of the third persons (e.g., McLeod et al., 1997).

To add a further layer to the problem, another factor may influence how individuals judge media effects on hypothetical others who vary along a social-distance dimension: perceived likelihood of media exposure. (Eveland et al., 1999). Eveland and his colleagues suggested that one reason why respondents do not always perceive socially more distant respondents to be more vulnerable to media than their socially closer counterparts is that they believe that supposedly more distant others have less exposure to media messages; adhering to a simplistic notion of media effects, respondents assume that these others are less susceptible to media influence. Eveland and his colleagues reported evidence consistent with this view, as they found that perceived likelihood of exposure predicted perceived message impact better than perceived social distance.

A recurring question is whether the social-distance research points up a delimiting condition for the TPE, indicating that the effect occurs in "particular social comparative contexts" (Duck & Mullin, 1995, p. 89). The research certainly shows that larger TPE emerge when the hypothetical others are described in broad, general terms. However, social distance is not a necessary condition for a TPE to occur. People assume that they are less influenced by messages than socially close others (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Duck, Hogg, et al., 1995; Gibbon & Durkin, 1995), attesting to the robustness of the phenomenon.

The TPE does not hinge on the respondent implicitly comparing himself or herself with vague, socially removed others, but when such comparisons occur (introduced by a researcher or in naturally occurring circumstances), they boost the size of the self–other discrepancy. The possibility that social-distance effects require that respondents perceive that third persons are exposed to the media content in question changes the tenor of social distance, making it a more confounded variable and suggesting that perceived media exposure, along with broad comparison others, must be present for socially meaningful TPE to emerge.

What Other Conditions Influence the Strength of the TPE?

In addition to message desirability and nature of the third persons, other moderator variables have been put forth, including media-use orientations (Price et al., 1997), education, age (Tiedge et al., 1991), knowledge (Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1996), issue importance (Mutz, 1989), self-esteem

(David & Johnson, 1998), and ego-involvement, broadly defined (Duck, Hogg, et al., 1995; Perloff, 1989). Of these, only knowledge (actual and self-perceived) and involvement have been tested in enough studies to warrant an extended discussion. Knowledge also is relevant because it may mediate the effects of education (Tiedge et al., 1991).

Knowledge. Knowledge has been found to be positively associated with the TPE in one study (Atwood, 1994) but not so clearly in others that reported that knowledge is related to the TPE, but only for certain messages (Price et al., 1997), just for estimates of media effects on the self (Price & Tewksbury, 1996), and only when the question about media influence on others preceded one asking about impact on the self (Price & Tewksbury, 1996). Theoretically, it would seem as if the variable that is being primarily or exclusively tapped by knowledge is perceived knowledge, and more precisely the belief that one has superior knowledge about the topic. Self-perceived knowledge may lead individuals to believe that they are immune to message effects, whereas others are more vulnerable. Evidence in support of this is offered by Lasorsa (1989) and Driscoll and Salwen (1997), but not by McLeod et al. (1997). A problem with perceived knowledge measures is that, when they require respondents to compare their knowledge to that of others, they can contaminate third-person measures, perhaps by inducing demand characteristics.

Ego-Involvement. Ego-involvement, defined as identification with a social group and possession of extreme attitudes on issues relevant to the group (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965), influences the magnitude of third-person perceptions (Perloff, 1989) and promotes hostile media bias (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) or the perception that neutral media content is biased against one's side. Three studies, conducted at different times and using different research procedures, found that pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans displayed hostile media bias (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Vallone et al., 1985) and also perceived that network news coverage of the Middle East would cause neutral viewers' attitudes to become more unfavorable toward their side and more favorable toward their antagonists, in line with the TPE (Perloff, 1989). In further support of a semitic corollary to the TPE, Jewish students exhibited a larger TPE for a Holocaust-denial ad than non-Jewish students, although religiosity did not play a part in the pattern of results that emerged (Price et al., 1998).

The ego-involvement hypothesis has been studied in other contexts, such as abortion, where considerably weaker hostile media effects were obtained (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994), perhaps due to participants' lack of involvement in the

topic and Australian electoral politics (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995). In support of the ego-involvement linkage, Duck and her colleagues found that students high in political identification estimated less campaign media influence on themselves and their political in-group than those low in political identification. High political identifiers also believed their political in-group was less influenced by media coverage than the political out-group, whereas no such differences emerged for low identifiers.

Three other studies obtained complementary findings, although they did not measure involvement or identification. Price, Huang, and Tewksbury (1997) reported that conservatives displayed larger TPE for attitude-incongruent negative news coverage of Newt Gingrich and the police. Driscoll and Salwen (1997) found that as respondents' belief in O. J. Simpson's guilt increased, third-person perceptions regarding a media message implying Simpon's innocence increased. Similarly, Salwen and Driscoll (1997) reported that respondents who believed Simpson was guilty presumed that a news report implying Simpson's innocence would exert a greater impact on third persons' beliefs of his innocence than on their own beliefs. The converse also held true.

Several explanations for this pattern of findings have been offered, including in-group/out-group contrast effects (Duck, Hogg, et al., 1995), social-judgment processes (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), prior beliefs about overall media bias that color perceptions of a specific message (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994), and perceived imperviousness of self to influence, which may have some truth given involved individuals' entrenched attitudes (Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998). Taken as a whole, the research indicates that there is a significant relationship between ego-involvement and media perceptions, with the caveat that not all studies have measured involvement directly nor shown that involvement influences self–other disparities, as opposed to hostile media bias.

Are There Consequences of the TPE?

The TPE is substantively important not only because it posits an intriguing "disconnect" between perceptions of communication effects on self and others, but also because it can have politically important consequences on opinions and behavior. The behavioral component of the TPE hypothesis has stimulated considerable research in recent years, most of it probing the possibility that third-person perceptions push individuals toward censoring content that is deemed undesirable.

Censorship. Nine studies have examined the connection between the TPE and willingness to censor media content, with five focusing on socially

undesirable entertainment and advertising and four on news and political communications.

Turning to the first category, one finds that the TPE predicts support for censoring (a) pornography (Gunther, 1995; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996); (b) television violence and media in general (Rojas et al., 1996); (c) sexual and violent television content in Singapore (Gunther & Hwa, 1996); (d) cigarette, beer, liquor, and gambling advertising (Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999); and (e) rap music (McLeod et al., 1997). However, a different pattern emerges in the case of news and political communications. Although third-person perceptions were significantly associated with support for restricting electoral campaign messages (Salwen, 1998), they failed to predict willingness to limit press coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial (Salwen & Driscoll, 1997), did not forecast support for an independent commission to regulate political communications (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), or predict opposition to printing a Holocaust-denial advertisement (Price et al., 1998). In fact, in the latter study, perceived impact of a Holocaust-denial ad on the self was positively related to support for publication.

Synthesis of Findings. Support for the behavioral component, as applied to censorship, is mixed. In all five studies of entertainment media and advertising, the TPE predicts willingness to censor media content, with third person perceptions adding significantly to the total R^2. The results are different in the case of news, where perhaps messages are seen as more legitimate or belief in the First Amendment overpowers fear of harmful media effects on others.

Although the behavioral hypothesis was tested rigorously, and knowledge has been advanced by these studies, the research raises methodological and theoretical issues. First, causal order has not been convincingly established. It is certainly possible that willingness to censor causes third-person perceptions, or another variable influences both (although several studies included a host of relevant attitudinal controls). Secondly, none of the studies examined actual behavior. A number of studies examined attitudes—which, in fairness, are not irrelevant to Davison's hypothesis—and two studies (Rojas et al., 1996 ; Price et al., 1998) assessed behavioral intentions. However, actual or self-reported behavior has not been not tapped. Thirdly, although the TPE has increased the size of the R^2, variance accounted for has not always been large, leading one to wonder whether the messages in question are perceived as sufficiently offensive and worthy of censorship to allow for meaningful effects of third-person perceptions.

On a conceptual level, it is worth pondering why one would expect the TPE to be such an important determinant of willingness to censor. Is it fear of harmful

effects of such material on others, as Davison suggested, or is it instead an intrinsic dislike of the material—rather than a utilitarian belief about effects—that motivates a desire to censor? Although Davison argued that "it is difficult to find a censor who will admit to being adversely affected by the information whose dissemination is to be prohibited" (p. 14), two studies found that perceived effects on the self predict willingness to censor (Gunther, 1995; Gunther & Hwa, 1996) as well as unwillingness to censor (Price et al., 1998). Thus, the relationship between the TPE and censorship attitudes is complex, with message type influencing the strength of the connection and both third- and first-person perceptions apparently underlying it.

Other Consequences. Despite the possibility of fruitful linkages with the spiral of silence, only two studies have examined whether the TPE influences willingness to speak out, and with mixed results (Mutz, 1989; Willnat, 1996). One other public opinion linkage, although not a hypothesized effect of the TPE, has recently been proposed by Gunther (1998) and is called the persuasive press inference. Gunther argued that mass media can indirectly influence public opinion by engendering the perception that third persons have been affected by news coverage. Two studies, an experiment (Gunther, 1998) and a survey (Mutz & Soss, 1997), provide support for this supposition.

THE CURRENT KNOWLEDGE BASE

The TPE is a reliable and persistent phenomenon that emerges across different content forms and research settings; its reliability has been documented by a recent meta-analysis (Paul et al., 1999). Although the TPE is not a measurement artifact, it can interact with question order under some conditions. As robust as it is, the effect is neither an inevitable nor invariant response to communications.

When messages are perceived as desirable, advocating outcomes that individuals perceive will benefit the self or agree with philosophically, people are not so likely to exhibit a TPE. Under these conditions (and perhaps also when messages are of high professional quality), participants will admit to being influenced. The findings on message desirability, although subject to some alternative explanation, are most parsimoniously explained by self-enhancement, indicating that propensity to see oneself in a positive light is an important determinant of TPE. Furthermore, as David and Johnson (1998) noted, there may be "a continuum of media effects along which TPE varies with the social undesirability of the outcome" (p. 55). Self–other discrepancies being complex, self-enhancement is not the only factor that underlies the TPE, as attributions,

media schemas, and psychological projection exert an (as yet indeterminate) impact.

Another factor that influences the magnitude of the TPE is social distance between self and comparison others. Although social distance is not a necessary condition for the TPE to occur, increasing the social distance (and presumably dissimilarity) between self and hypothetical others makes the TPE larger and probably more socially meaningful. Like message desirability, social distance is a fuzzy concept that carries many meanings, including psychological dissimilarity, lack of familiarity, vagueness of the comparison other, and perceived likelihood of media exposure. The latter is particularly important, as social distance effects may require the assumption that hypothetical others are exposed to the message in question. Social distance is fast becoming a hopelessly confounded concept, one that could be usefully broken up into component parts. Nonetheless, the research on this topic points out an important point, namely, that the nature of the relationship between self and comparison others is not fixed and invariant, as originally presumed, but variable. More importantly, this relationship, as respondents conceive of it, influences the size of the TPE and perhaps also the degree to which the effect is rooted in overestimation or underestimation.

Other variables have also been put forth as moderators of the TPE. Knowledge and ego-involvement, in particular, have effects, although more evidence must be accumulated before one can build them in as corollaries.

One of the major questions that has occupied the current generation of TPE researchers is whether the effect is a "universal" public opinion tendency or a more restricted phenomenon. There is no question that in the aggregate, individuals are prone to perceive that messages influence others significantly more than the self. At the same time, not everyone in all situations exhibits a TPE, and the strength of the effect and the meaning it conveys depend on situational factors. More generally, the notion that the TPE might oscillate between the universal and particularistic polarities is a stimulating and complex one. Like most questions involving polarities, the answer is not likely to be a simple one and certainly will not be resolved by one or two critical studies.

The TPE theoretically can have important consequences for political behavior and public opinion in the areas of censorship, spiral of silence, and indirect effects of political media. There is no evidence that third-person perceptions influence actual behavior, and inferences about effects must be tempered by the recognition that causal direction has not been established. Nonetheless, the TPE does predict attitudes toward censorship of socially undesirable materials. Importantly, first-person, as well as third-person, perceptions operate when

consequences are contemplated (e.g., Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Price et al., 1998), contrary to what Davison (1983) argued.

One final methodological point needs to be made. Although the TPE has been tested in a variety of domains, with controls properly administered, there is a certain artificiality about the research. In no study have individuals been exposed to a communication the way they ordinarily are in everyday life and asked in a nonthreatening way that militates against self-enhancing biases to estimate message effects on others and the self. In addition, research assumes people make TPE comparisons. By demanding that people make quantitative estimates of media effects on others and themselves, researchers beg the question of whether people actually engage in such a process when left to their own devices. Anecdotal evidence (Hooper, 1998; Perloff, 1998b) suggests that they do, but the degree to which people actually make third-person comparisons and how they do so should be viewed as empirical questions.

DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Third-person effect research is flourishing, and justifiably so. Nonetheless, a number of issues require clarification and expansion if the area is to grow in the decades to come.

First, ecological validity of third-person studies must be enhanced. Reliance on student samples may overstate TPE (Paul et al., 1999); given students' perception that they are more knowledgeable than third persons, it would be helpful to study a broad range of respondents. In addition, to reduce the intrusion of desirability biases, it would be useful to force a conservative test of the TPE by asking respondents, in a context where they felt comfortable acknowledging effects, the domain-specific impact of a message to which they had been exposed. Research might also refrain from setting up self–other comparisons in an effort to examine the way people spontaneously think about media effects on self and others. What types of hypothetical others are invoked when people compare media effects on self versus others? Do people even compare themselves to others when thinking about media effects? What form do such comparisons take? Also, on a methodological note, research should continue to probe ways in which question order and wording interact with situational factors in an effort to pinpoint underlying processes.

Second, it is important to examine possible contextual variations in the TPE. Do effects vary as a function of message type (e.g., political news, escapist fare, advertising, opinion polls), perceived communicator intent (which gives rise to differential attributions), and cultural context? Are TPE less pronounced in Asian

cultures, which stress interrelatedness of the person to the social environment, than in conventional Western cultures, which emphasize the uniqueness of the individual (Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Heine & Lehman, 1995)? Are TPE less likely to occur among poor people from rural and urban areas, who are exposed to so many risks that they cannot help but acknowledge their vulnerability to danger (Mays & Cochran, 1988)?

Third, we need to broaden the scope of third-person studies by looking at variables other than size of the self–other disparity. It would be interesting to look at the content of perceptions, such as the types of peripheral cues that people assume are most effective with third persons (White, 1997) and variance in perceptions (e.g., do people assume that in-group members exhibit more variable reactions to messages than out-groupers?).

Fourth, researchers should explore implications of self-enhancement perspectives for the TPE. If people are willing to acknowledge message effects when it is acceptable to view oneself as influenced, might one turn the TPE into an independent variable (Brosius & Engel, 1996) in an effort to predict who is more likely to be persuaded by communications? More generally, researchers could usefully integrate the TPE with persuasion theory to determine the types of messages that will overcome illusions of invulnerability. Current research suggests that such illusions, which are barriers to fear appeal effects, can be reduced if messages are perceived to contain strong arguments of high professional quality.

Fifth, studies of the behavioral component could be enhanced by taking into account theories of attitude–behavior relations, such as the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and accessibility (see Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1997, for a review). For example, the theory of reasoned action suggests that the TPE should predict censorship behavior only when both constructs are measured at the same level of specificity and when beliefs about media effects, evaluations of these beliefs, normative beliefs, and motivation to comply are taken into account. Accessibility suggests that third-person perceptions should predict behavior when exaggerated estimates of media effects on others are made accessible, perhaps by the media.

Finally, there is reason to believe that the ubiquitous Internet will alter the dynamics of third-person perceptions. The TPE assumes an audience of message receivers. However, the Internet makes people both senders and receivers. Anecdotal observations suggest that some chat room members egocentrically believe that everyone will see and believe their postings; if true, this suggests that they exhibit first-person effects. Moreover, to the degree that the TPE hinges on perceived likelihood of message exposure, how does a world of fragmented

media, in which people can reasonably believe others will not see a certain message, change the dynamics of third-person perceptions?

NOTES

[1]Although the TPE refers to differential perceptions of media effects, the Clinton poll example falls under its rubric as Davison envisioned the TPE as a general explanation of differential perceptions of the opinions of self and others, with a focus on perceptions of message effects. Indeed, theorists have recently argued that the domain of the TPE should be enlarged to include differential perceptions of media use (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Eveland et al., 1999), which applies to the poll example.

[2]Although Glynn and Ostman (1988) ostensibly failed to support the TPE, a careful look at their study reveals that they looked at perceived susceptibility to others' influence rather than perceptions of message effects per se. The study certainly bears on the larger issue of perceptions of others' opinions, but not so directly on the TPE hypothesis.

[3]Although these surveys usefully extend the TPE participant pool beyond the usual suspects of college sophomores, they have a shortcoming: They cannot ensure that respondents are reacting to the same content. Although this may not affect the discrepancy between self and other, as Gunther (1995) noted, it does introduce an ambiguity into the perceptual findings.

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