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# Susceptibility and Severity

## *Perceptual Dimensions Underlying the Third-Person Effect*

*The authors posit that 2 distinct perceptual dimensions underlie the third-person effect hypothesis: judgments of susceptibility to communications (a cognitive process) and severity of communications (an affective process). To explore this, 194 adults were asked (a) to estimate their own and others' susceptibility to various types of advertising content and the severity of such advertising's effects on themselves and others, and (b) to express their willingness to censor these classes of commercials. The advertising content fell into 2 broad categories: controversial products (cigarettes, liquor, and beer) and gambling services (casinos and lotteries). Findings indicate that third-person perceptions exist in terms of susceptibility and severity, and that both of these perceptual biases are related to individuals' willingness to censor advertising.*

Much research growing out of Davison's (1983) third-person effect hypothesis supports the contention that individuals estimate the impact of various types of presumably undesirable communications—media violence and pornography, product advertising, and political campaign messages—to be greater on others than on themselves, and, as a result, they become more inclined to support censorship of these messages (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Gunther, 1995; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Salwen, 1998; Shah, Faber, Youn, & Rojas, 1997). Although evidence of these phenomena rapidly accumulates, "Third-person effect research has yet to conceptualize media 'effects' and assess the relative importance of these effect dimensions on third-person perception and support for restriction" (Salwen, Dupagne, &

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Paul, 1998, p. 4). Theories of risk perception (Sandman, 1994; Slovic, 1992) and fear appeals (Leventhal, 1970; Rogers, 1975, 1983), as well as some work on the third-person effect (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), suggest that judgments of media influence involve discrete cognitive and affective elements. Drawing on this research, we posit that two distinct judgments underlie the third-person perception: estimates of (a) *susceptibility* to media effects and (b) the *severity* of these effects.

Although research on the third-person effect frequently confounds susceptibility and severity, the distinction between *likelihood assessment* and *benefit-harm appraisal* is well grounded in "the general expectancy–value principle that behavior is a function of its expected consequences and their perceived value" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 440; see Fishbein, 1963, 1965). Similar formulations are central to purposive theories of motivation (Lewin, 1938; Tolman, 1958) and utility models of decision making (Abelson & Levi, 1985). We contend that attention to both of these factors may be especially important when considering the linkage between third-person perception and the willingness to censor, for as Perloff (1993) maintained, "An individual who perceives that a communication will exert a stronger influence on other than the self will take action only if he or she attaches negative . . . affect to the message" (p. 180). Theoretical support for this perspective can be found in Rogers' (1975, 1983) *protection motivation theory*, which postulates that judgments of susceptibility to a threat and severity of the threat are separate appraisal processes that combine to shape individuals' danger control behaviors. From this perspective, censorship may be an adaptive response—a coping strategy—to deal with the harm posed by mass media.

We explored these issues with a survey of adults who (a) estimated the susceptibility to and severity of various types of advertising content on self and others, and (b) expressed their willingness to censor these classes of commercial messages. This advertising content fell into two broad categories: controversial products (cigarettes, liquor, and beer) and gambling services (casinos and lotteries). Notably, advertising for such products and services increasingly has faced calls for restriction by policy makers, journalists, and the public, all of whom oppose the supposed harm these communications cause. Exposure to such advertising, it is argued, functions as a first step toward abuse of cigarettes, alcohol, casinos, and lotteries. However, because these assertions are seldom based on research linking advertising to dangerous effects, the basis for censorship demands seems to be the expectation of powerful and harmful effects on others (Fahy, Smart, Pride, & Ferrell, 1995; Garrison, 1987; Richards, 1996; Scripps, 1997; Shao & Hill, 1994; Teinowitz, 1997).

## Conceptualizing the Third-Person Effect

Theorists concerned with third-person perception have offered both cognitive and affective explanations to account for differential estimates of media impact, implicitly supporting a multidimensional conception of effects. To explain the perceptual bias at the heart of the third-person effect, many researchers rely on basic cognitive principles of causal attribution (see Rojas et al., 1996; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). These scholars suggest that due to the fundamental attribution error, individuals understand media effects on themselves in terms of situational (external) factors, but rely on dispositional (internal) explanations for the impact of media on others. As Gunther (1991) reckoned, observers generally underestimate other people's awareness of situational factors such as the persuasive intent of media content, and therefore they judge these others to be vulnerable to message effects; however, when judging the impact of media on themselves, they usually account for their own attentiveness to such features (see Jones, 1990; Ross, 1977). Self-serving biases—or egotistical differential attributions—also may account for third-person perceptions (Perloff, 1989; Rojas et al., 1996; see also D. T. Miller, 1976; Stephan & Gollwitzer, 1981). When a message is deemed negative or dangerous, it is functional for individuals to estimate that others are more susceptible to message effect than themselves, because such attributions enhance beliefs of personal invulnerability and control (Gunther, 1991). Thus, individuals are expected to perceive others as particularly susceptible to media influence, although they view themselves as less affected.[2]

Given this attributional explanation, it is not surprising that most tests of the third-person effect hypothesis focus on the susceptibility dimension by requiring research participants to estimate how "influential" or "powerful" certain communications are on self and others; in contrast, severity usually is "conceived *a priori* based on message attributes" (Salwen et al., 1998, p. 5.; see also Hu & Wu, 1996; McLeod et al., 1997; Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997; Rojas et al., 1996; Shah et al., 1997; Tewksbury, Huang, & Price, 1996; H. A. White, 1997; Willnat, 1996). Although rarely tested, support for a discrete severity dimension can be found in the fact that the magnitude of the third-person effect decreases as the desirability of the communication effect increases. Message content judged to be negative is assumed to influence others more than oneself; however, when the message is thought to be positive, the perceptual bias is substantially attenuated (Innes & Zeitz, 1988). For example, Gunther and Thorson (1992), who studied public service announcements (PSAs) and product and service advertisements, found that, for PSAs, there was no statistical difference between the perceived effects on

self and others. On the other hand, for advertisements, the third-person effect did appear, but as advertisements increasingly created a positive emotion in the viewer, the magnitude of third-person perception weakened. Similarly, Brosius and Engel (1996) found that framing media impact in negative rather than positive terms partly explains the difference in perceived effects. Thus, a number of studies show that desirable messages lessen but do not completely eliminate the discrepancy between self and others, suggesting that more than one perceptual process underlies the third-person effect (Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Salwen et al., 1998).

To account for these findings, Gunther and Mundy (1993) referred to work on "unrealistic optimism" (see Weinstein, 1980). According to this perspective, people reinforce self-esteem with a bias toward positive personal outcome; as such, the "benefit likelihood" of a topic determines the size of the discrepancy between perceived effects on self and others. Yet, even with this explanation of how judgments about the negative consequences of message content contribute to third-person perception, only a few scholars have assessed whether a third-person distinction can be found in assessments of the severity of message effects. Notably, research that conceives of third-person perception in these terms has found support for differential estimates of severity (Ognianova, Thorson, & Rahn, 1995; see also Salwen et al., 1998). For instance, Rucinski and Salmon (1990) and Cohen and Davis (1991) detected that individuals believed political attack advertising had a more "harmful" or "negative" effect on others than on themselves.[3]

The risk perception literature supports the view that susceptibility and severity are indeed conceptually discrete dimensions. For example, Slovic (1992) and Sandman (1994) theorized that people's risk perceptions are composed of judgments about risk likelihood, a cognitive response, and a sense of dread or outrage, an affective response that "captures such things as perceived lack of control, a risk's catastrophic potential, and a more generalized evaluation of fearfulness" (Dunwoody, Neuwirth, & Griffin, 1995, p. 3). This affective response has been found to be a particularly good predictor of danger control behaviors. Likewise, research across a range of contexts has found that negative beliefs have a powerful effect on impression formation and choice (Klein, 1991; Richey, Bono, Lewis, & Richey, 1982; Shapiro & Rieger, 1989; Van Der Plight & Eiser, 1980). These findings suggest that degree of severity may be particularly important for examining Davison's (1983) assertion that differential estimation of media effects on self and others leads people to take some preventive action.

Most of the initial research that looked for a behavioral outcome of the third-person effect failed to detect one (Gunther, 1991; Perloff, 1993). One

interpretation of these findings is that people do not exhibit the expected behavior because they view their perspective as different from the opinion of the general public; a spiral of silence effect inhibits their behavior (Mutz, 1989). However, recent research links differences in the estimated influence of communications on self and others with the willingness to censor pornography, violence on television, controversial rap lyrics, and political communications (Gunther, 1995; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Lee & Yang, 1996; McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas et al., 1996; Salwen, 1998; Shah et al., 1997). Theorists explain this relation as "strong paternalism," because it is based on the assumption that people are incapable of contending with media content for themselves and that social intervention is the only way to protect them from communications' adverse effects (McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas et al., 1996).

## Censorship and Protection Motivation

Censorship is an enigmatic concept. Ranging from outright legal prohibitions to more subtle forms of control, censorship can be understood most broadly as a general inclination to favor the restriction of communications to protect people from the perceived harmful effects of what they might read, see, or hear. A substantial body of theory in political science has developed around research exploring the factors that affect public tolerance of speech (Corbett, 1982; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995; McClosky & Brill, 1983). In contrast, research on factors contributing to individuals' support for expressive rights of mass media has been rather limited (Andsager, 1993; Immerwahr & Doble, 1982; M. M. Miller, Andsager, & Wyatt, 1992; Shao & Hill, 1994; Tewksbury et al., 1996; Worchel, Arnold, & Baker, 1975).

Perhaps because of the varying focus on what type of media content is being censored or what type of speech is being tolerated, the factors associated with opposition to (or support for) expressive rights remain unclear. Among attitudinal and orientational variables, religiosity, authoritarianism, and conservatism have received some support as predictors of the willingness to censor (Hense & Wright, 1992; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982). McClosky and Brill (1983) and H. D. White (1986) reported that people who claim a strong religious affiliation are more likely to oppose civil liberties than those who profess no religious affiliation. Ritts and Engbretson (1991) and Byrne, Cherry, Lamberth, and Mitchell (1973) provided evidence of a relation between authoritarianism and procensorship attitudes. Finally, Bobo and Licari (1989), Tewksbury et al. (1996), and McLeod et al. (1997) concluded that conservatives are less tolerant of controversial speech than are political liberals.

However, these reported relations are not consistently upheld in other research. For example, Rojas et al. (1996) did not observe a meaningful association between religiosity and the willingness to restrict television violence, whereas Schell and Bonin (1989) found that procensorship attitudes are unrelated to authoritarianism. Other studies report only small, often nonsignificant, differences between conservatives and liberals in terms of tolerance for speech (Christensen & Dunlap, 1984; Protho & Grigg, 1960; Thompson, 1995; Thompson, Chaffee, & Oshagan, 1990). One study even pointed to a reverse relation between conservatism and procensorship attitudes (Suedfeld, Steel, & Schmidt, 1994).

Comparable confusion surrounds demographic predictors. Some studies suggest that men are more supportive of expressive rights than are women (Andsager, 1992, 1993; M. M. Miller et al., 1992; Wilson, 1975). However, Tewksbury et al. (1996) did not report a relation with gender among a research population of undergraduates (see also Schell & Bonin, 1989). H. D. White (1986) also failed to find differences based on gender in secondary analysis of national survey data, but observed that the willingness to censor increases with age and decreases with higher levels of education. Although other research supports this linkage between educational level and tolerance for speech (Erskine, 1970; M. M. Miller et al., 1992), Ryan and Martinson (1986) reported no significant differences based on age or level of education in terms of a willingness to censor the student press (see also Schell & Bonin, 1989).

Thus, the existing literature provides a limited theoretical framework for understanding the motivations for censorship. Demographic, orientational, and attitudinal predictors provide contradictory results depending on the topic and the population under study. The only commonality across censorship studies appears to be the belief that exposure produces negative consequences. Regardless of context, a key justification for restricting or banning media content remains the perceived harmful effects of the message or the perceived threat posed by the communicator (Marcus et al., 1995; Sullivan et al., 1982).

Particularly useful for understanding the willingness to censor, then, may be protection motivation theory, which postulates that *threat appraisal* is an important determinant of coping strategies for danger control (Rogers, 1975, 1983). Specifically, the theory contends that protection motivation is a positive function of the perceived susceptibility to a hazard (a cognitive process) and the perceived severity of a hazard (an affective process), and a negative function of the benefits associated with continuing maladaptive behaviors (Dunwoody et al., 1995). These components of the threat appraisal process

are thought to have an additive effect on protection motivation, which, in turn, influences behavioral intention.[4] Although this framework generally has been applied to individual-level coping strategies—that is, to stop smoking or to use a condom—it arguably could be expanded to include more impersonal responses, such as calls for the widespread restriction of messages believed to be threatening.

Combining these insights with scholarship on the third-person effect raises the prospect that attempts to censor communications may be motivated by concerns about the effects of communications on others. That is, when a perceived threat is not grounded in individual behavior such as choosing to smoke or engaging in unprotected sex—but rather is societal in scope, basic attributional processes suggest that individuals will perceive others to be more affected by this danger than themselves. Indeed, censors defend their actions as allegedly protecting the "helpless" from blasphemous or threatening ideas and often view themselves as morally superior to the "vulnerable" populations they wish to protect (Dority, 1991; Frohnmayer, 1995).[5] Furthermore, research suggests that advocates for censorship overestimate the influence of media on others, the "gullible" public (Gunther, 1995; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas et al., 1996; Salwen, 1998). Thus, people advocating censorship should see large differences in the perceived susceptibility of themselves versus these others. However, protection motivation theory indicates a second factor also may be consequential to predicting procensorship attitudes: the perceived severity of the media effect. Thus, from a protection motivation standpoint, willingness to censor may be independently related to differences between self and others in the perceived severity of message outcomes as well as the perceived susceptibility to this message.

## Hypotheses

This study extends research on the third-person effect by examining people's estimates of media influence on self and others for advertising that promotes controversial products (cigarettes, liquor, and beer) and gambling services (casinos and lotteries). These forms of communication provide a particularly pertinent context in which to study the linkage between the perceptual bias and the willingness to censor, because both have faced extensive calls for restriction; as McLeod et al. (1997) explained, third-person perception "becomes more meaningful if it is linked with real world consequences" (p. 154).

Perhaps more important, this study explores whether two discrete dimensions—susceptibility and severity—underlie the third-person effect

hypothesis and independently contribute to the willingness to censor media messages. Prior research has found that people believe undesirable messages have a more powerful influence on others than on themselves (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Perloff, 1993; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). Because advertising for socially sensitive products and services is thought by many to be harmful and dangerous (Fahy et al., 1995; Richards, 1996; Scripps, 1997; Shao & Hill, 1994; Teinowitz, 1997), third persons should be seen as especially vulnerable to persuasive efforts. As suggested by theories of risk perception (Sandman, 1994; Slovic, 1992) and fear appeals (Leventhal, 1970; Rogers, 1983), individuals may not only believe there is a higher likelihood of others being influenced by these messages (susceptibility), they also may conclude that these others are more adversely affected by media content (severity). Thus, we hypothesize:

*H1a:* People will estimate that others are more susceptible to advertising for controversial products and gambling services than they are themselves.

*H1b:* People will estimate that others are more severely affected by advertising for controversial products and gambling services than they are themselves.

Because censorship demands appear to be closely intertwined with the supposed harm caused by communications, perceptions of media impact partly may explain calls for restriction. From the standpoint of protection motivation theory, individuals may manifest procensorship attitudes for two reasons: (a) they perceive themselves and/or others to be susceptible to media influence, or (b) they perceive themselves and/or others to be severely affected by media influence. Recent research examining various forms of controversial media content suggests that an important motivation for censoring communications is the desire to protect others from the effects of these communications rather than a concern that these communication will affect oneself (Gunther, 1995; McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas et al., 1996). Accordingly, we predict that such a relation will exist for controversial products and gambling services advertising.

Specifically, we posit that the willingness to censor these types of advertising content will be related to both differences between self and others in the perceived susceptibility to a threat and the perceived severity of the threat, because danger control involves two separate appraisal processes, one cognitive and the other affective. Furthermore, we contend that the third-person effect gap (estimated effects on others – estimated effects on self) will predict procensorship attitudes even after accounting for the contributions of other

variables, including demographic characteristics, orientations toward media and politics, attitudinal variables, usage of the product or service, and total perceived effects (estimated effects on others + estimated effects on self) of the advertising content. Thus, we hypothesize:

*H2a:* Third-person perceptions about susceptibility to advertising effects for controversial products and gambling services will be positively associated with support for censorship of these communications, even after accounting for other potentially confounding variables.

*H2b:* Third-person perceptions about severity of advertising for controversial products and gambling services will be positively associated with support for censorship of these communications, even after accounting for other potentially confounding variables.

## Methods

Data were collected in a large midwestern American city during the winter of 1996. Adult respondents (aged 18 and over) were interviewed at shopping malls. Respondents were recruited via a mall-intercept technique, with special attention paid to age, gender, and race to insure a broad spectrum of the adult population. Those who agreed to participate were ushered to a nearby interview room, where they completed a self-administered questionnaire under the instruction of a fieldwork supervisor. Completion times ranged from 20 to 40 minutes. Respondents received a $5 gift certificate in return for their participation. Overall, 194 adults participated in the study. Ages ranged from 18 to 82, with a mean age of 45 years old. The majority (61%) were women. Most respondents (56%) came from households with an annual income between $20,000 and $59,999. Twenty-five percent reported an income of $60,000 and over, and 20% reported an income of less than $20,000. As for education, 21% completed high school, just under half (46%) had attended some college or technical school, and 27% had completed college or graduate school. These demographic data suggest that the mall-intercept technique produced a sample that was slightly older, more educated and affluent, and included more women than the general population.

The survey instrument consisted of items designed to measure six areas: (a) the willingness to censor; (b) perceived effects on self and others; (c) product usage; (d) attitudinal variables; (e) media use and political affiliation; and (f) demographic characteristics. The first two question sets were used to test the proposed hypotheses, and the other four question sets were included to control for alternative explanations. Most of the items were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

To assess the criterion variable in our model, the survey included questions designed to explore people's willingness to ban or restrict advertising for three different controversial products—cigarettes, beer, and liquor—and two types of gambling services—casinos and lotteries. To determine censorship attitudes toward advertising of each product or service, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements that advocated (a) banning the advertising and (b) restricting the advertising.[6] For purposes of data reduction, these items were factor analyzed using a Varimax rotation. This analysis yielded two clear factors that accounted for 67.2% of the variance in the individual items. The first factor was composed of items concerning "controversial products" (with factor loading ranging from .697 to .755), and the second factor was composed of items concerning "gambling services" (with factor loadings ranging from .673 to .878). Scores for these items were combined to create two separate indexes for the willingness to censor each category of advertising. The index for willingness to censor controversial products advertising achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .87, and the corresponding index for gambling services yielded an alpha of .88. Aggregated scores were used for analysis.

To assess the perceived susceptibility to the various types of advertising on self and others, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements that advertising for cigarettes, liquor, beer, casinos, or lotteries has "a powerful effect" on "me" and on "many adults." The wording of the self and others questions was identical except for the first- or third-person connotation.[7] Susceptibility was operationalized in these terms for two reasons: (a) to avoid the negative implications associated with an overt focus on vulnerability; and (b) to concentrate respondents' attention on the question of likelihood of influence, which is at the heart of the susceptibility concept. Immediately following these items, participants estimated message severity on self and others by responding to the question "And this effect is . . . ?" on a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored by the words *very negative* and *very positive.* Severity was operationalized in these terms to allow for the possibility that some people viewed the impact of these messages to be positive. These items were reversed so that higher scale values indicated a more severe estimated effect. For each category of advertising, the specific self and others items were summed to create composite indexes of susceptibility and severity. The paired mean differences of these indexes were used to test the first set of hypotheses. The third-person effect gap variables constructed from these indexes were used in tests of the second set of hypotheses.

To confirm that susceptibility and severity—as measured and used in subsequent analysis—are indeed distinguishable constructs, correlations were

run between the indexes measuring perceived effects on self and others for these two dimensions. For controversial product advertising, the correlation between perceived susceptibility and perceived severity was $r = -.05$ (*ns*) for effects on self and $r = .22$ ($p < .01$) for effects on others. For gambling services advertising, the correlation between these two dimensions was $r = -.06$ (*ns*) for effects on self and $r = .29$ ($p < .001$) for effects on others. Thus, these perceptual dimensions appear to be discernible in the minds of respondents; estimates of susceptibility and severity on self are essentially independent, whereas estimates on others are weakly correlated, sharing only 5% to 8% of common variance.[8]

To test other factors that may lead people to support the restriction of advertising messages, two attitudinal variables (authoritarianism and religiosity) that previously had been found to affect censorship attitudes in some studies were included in this study. The religiosity scale was developed by Putney and Middleton (1961) and is composed of four items. The authoritarianism scale was constructed by Ray (1979) and is composed of 10 items. For each scale, factor analysis was performed. The religiosity scale yielded a one-factor solution structure, and this scale had an alpha of .81. The authoritarianism scale was also unidimensional and had an alpha of .67. Questions on the willingness to censor and third-person perception were randomly interspersed with items from other question sets to minimize response bias due to the order of presentation.[9]

A political affiliation scale also was constructed, combining political party identification with degree of partisanship; it ranged from strong Republican to strong Democrat. Political involvement was rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all involved*) to 5 (*extremely involved*). Media use variables were included by measuring the amounts of local and national TV news viewing and the amount of newspaper reading per week. Finally, measures assessed demographic variables such as gender, age, education, parents' education, and family income.

## Results

### *Tests of Hypotheses Concerning Third-Person Perceptions*

H1a predicted that people would perceive others as more susceptible to the persuasive impact of controversial products advertising (i.e., ads for cigarettes, liquor, and beer) and gambling services advertising (i.e., ads for casinos and lotteries) than themselves. Additionally, it was hypothesized (H1b)

Table 1
t *Tests of Differences in Perceived Susceptibility and Severity*

| | Self | | Others | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Susceptibility to controversial products advertising[a] | 6.48 | 3.05 | 10.96**** | 2.95 |
| Susceptibility to gambling services advertising[b] | 4.42 | 2.02 | 7.62**** | 1.88 |
| Severity of controversial products advertising[c] | 10.49 | 2.97 | 11.02** | 2.80 |
| Severity of gambling services advertising[d] | 7.08 | 1.94 | 7.35* | 1.90 |

*Note*. All tests are one-tailed.
a. Susceptibility scale for "controversial products" advertising ranged from 3 to 15, in which high values indicated a more powerful perceived effect (*df* = 189).
b. Susceptibility scale for "gambling services" advertising ranged from 2 to 10, in which high values indicated a more powerful perceived effect (*df* = 189).
c. Severity scale for "controversial products" advertising ranged from 3 to 15, in which high values indicated a more negative perceived effect (*df* = 165).
d. Severity scale for "gambling services" advertising ranged from 2 to 10, in which high values indicated a more negative perceived effect (*df* = 163).
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$. ****$p < .001$.

that both types of advertising would be seen as more severely affecting others than oneself. To test these hypotheses, paired *t* tests were run. As expected, significant differences in perceived effects emerged (see Table 1).

The mean estimate of susceptibility to controversial products advertising was significantly higher on others than on self, with a standardized difference of 1.49 points.[10] For gambling services, the mean estimate of susceptibility to advertising was also significantly higher on others than on self, with a standardized difference of 1.60. Differences in perceived severity scores were not as dramatic. Nonetheless, the mean estimate of the severity of controversial products advertising was significantly higher on others than on self, with a standardized difference of .17 points. For gambling services, the difference of means was marginally significant, with a higher estimate of severity on others than on self—a standardized difference of .14 points.

Overall, these results demonstrate that respondents perceived others to be more affected by advertising for controversial products and gambling services than themselves. More important, the basic perceptual bias emerged for both of the hypothesized dimensions—susceptibility and severity—although differences were larger for estimates of susceptibility to influence than estimates of severity of influence. The less pronounced differences in perceptions of harm may partly be due to the fact that respondents tended to use the

bottom half of the severity scale, which may have resulted in a ceiling effect. It may also be the case that basic attributional processes result in a larger perceptual bias in terms of susceptibility than severity.

### *Tests of Hypotheses Concerning Censorship and the Third-Person Effect*

H2a and H2b predicted that third-person perceptions about both susceptibility to and severity of advertising for controversial products and gambling services would be positively associated with support for censorship of these messages, even after accounting for other factors thought to predict the willingness to censor. Recently, McLeod et al. (1997) demonstrated the value of using a regression technique, termed the "diamond model" (see Whitt, 1983), for analyzing the impact of third-person perceptions on censorship attitudes. This technique uses a "difference score variable" to test if there are any effects of the third-person gap above and beyond the additive "effects of its components" (the sum of perceived effects on self and others). This analytic approach provides a number of advantages: (a) It is a more stringent test of the hypothesized relation than typically is used in third-person effect research; (b) it allows for the possibility that generalized threat appraisal on self and others contributes to procensorship attitudes; and (c) it overcomes the concern that the contribution of the third-person effect gap to models predicting the willingness to censor is simply a methodological artifact of greater total estimated effects. We apply this analytic strategy in our tests of the behavioral component of the third-person effect, with susceptibility and severity distinguished as separate perceptual dimensions.

To test these hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regressions were performed for both topics. A total of 17 independent variables, grouped in six separate blocks, were included in our model. Demographic variables (gender, age, education, parents' education, and income), orientational variables (media use and political alignment), and attitudinal variables (religiosity and authoritarianism) were entered in the first three blocks. After these blocks were input, the appropriate product usage variables were entered, followed by blocks consisting of the estimated susceptibility (Block 5) and, finally, the estimated severity (Block 6).

It should be noted that this analytic approach is a more conservative test for severity than for susceptibility; this strategy was adopted because it is one of the goals of this study to explore whether the severity dimension contributes to the willingness to censor beyond the more established susceptibility dimension. Thus, our analysis of the behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis allows us to observe whether estimates of message

severity contribute to the prediction after estimates of susceptibility (the more commonly used variable in third-person studies) have been taken into account. For these last two blocks, total perceived effects (estimated effects on others + estimated effects on self) were entered into the equations simultaneously with the third-person effect gap (estimated effects on others – estimated effects on self).[11]

### *Censorship of Controversial Product Advertising*

Overall, the model tested here performed well as a predictor of censorship attitudes toward controversial products advertising. The regression equation accounted for almost half (48%) of the variance in procensorship attitudes. Results of the analysis also indicate that the perceived effect variables explained a significant amount of variance in the willingness to censor this advertising content after other variables had been controlled (see Table 2).

Demographic variables, as a block, accounted for 20% of the variance in procensorship attitudes. Specifically, gender and age were significant predictors of the willingness to censor controversial product advertising, with women more willing to censor than men, and older people more willing to censor than younger people. Although orientational variables and attitudinal predictors did not significantly contribute to the equation, results show that product usage was negatively related to procensorship attitudes even after accounting for demographics, media use, political orientation, and attitudinal variables. Drinking and smoking status accounted for an additional 15% of the variance in willingness to censor cigarettes, liquor, and beer. Notably, both variables contributed significantly to the final regression equation with all variables included.

After controlling for the variables discussed previously, the variables derived from estimates of susceptibility and severity accounted for an additional 10% of the variance in attitudes toward censoring advertising for controversial products, with the perceived severity variables, as a block, explaining 4% of variance beyond that explained by the block of perceived susceptibility variables. Although total estimated susceptibility on self and others was a significant predictor, the third-person gap in susceptibility did not contribute significantly to the final regression equation. In contrast, the third-person gap of severity did predict the willingness to censor controversial product advertising, even when the total estimated severity of the advertising on self and others was simultaneously included in the model, which was itself positively related to the willingness to censor controversial products advertising. Therefore, using this conservative test, H2a (third-person

Table 2
*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Willingness to Censor Controversial Products Advertising*

| | Censorship of Controversial Products Advertising[a] | |
|---|---|---|
| | Final Beta[b] | $R^2$ Δ |
| Demographics | | .20**** |
| Gender[c] | .27**** | |
| Age | .32*** | |
| Education | –.06 | |
| Parental education | .00 | |
| Income | .03 | |
| Orientational | | .03 |
| TV news viewing | –.01 | |
| Newspaper reading | –.16** | |
| Political involvement | .12 | |
| Political party identification[d] | .10 | |
| Attitudinal | | .00 |
| Religiosity | .02 | |
| Authoritarianism | .03 | |
| Product usage | | .15**** |
| Drink alcohol | –.30**** | |
| Smoke cigarettes | –.15** | |
| Estimated susceptibility[e] | | .06*** |
| Other + self perceptions | .22*** | |
| Third-person perceptions | –.04 | |
| Estimated severity[f] | | .04*** |
| Other + self perceptions | .19** | |
| Third-person perceptions | .18** | |
| Total $R^2$ | | .48**** |

*Note*. $N$ = 167.
a. High scale value equals greater intention to act in favor of censorship.
b. Beta weights from final regression equation with all variables included.
c. Coded as 0 = male, 1 = female.
d. Ranged from 1 (strong Republican) to 7 (strong Democrat).
e. Higher scale values equals greater perceived power of the communications.
f. Higher scale values equals greater perceived negativity of the communications.
**$p$ < .05. ***$p$ < .01. ****$p$ < .001.

perception of susceptibility) was not confirmed, whereas H2b (third-person perception of severity) was supported.

### *Censorship of Gambling Services Advertising*

The model also performed well in attempts to predict individual differences in the willingness to censor gambling services advertising, accounting for 44% of the variance in procensorship attitudes. Parallel to the results for

Table 3
*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Willingness to Censor Gambling Services Advertising*

| | Censorship of Gambling Services Advertising[a] | |
|---|---|---|
| | Final Beta[b] | $R^2$ Δ |
| Demographics | | .10** |
| Gender[c] | .24*** | |
| Age | .12 | |
| Education | –.03 | |
| Parental education | –.08 | |
| Income | –.02 | |
| Orientational | | .11*** |
| TV news viewing | –.23** | |
| Newspaper reading | .14 | |
| Political involvement | .13 | |
| Political party identification[d] | .09 | |
| Attitudinal | | .03 |
| Religiosity | .08 | |
| Authoritarianism | .03 | |
| Product usage | | .02 |
| Play lottery | –.10 | |
| Gamble at casino | –.08 | |
| Estimated susceptibility[e] | | .12**** |
| Other + self perceptions | .33**** | |
| Third-person perceptions | .17** | |
| Estimated severity[f] | | .06*** |
| Other + self perceptions | .17** | |
| Third-person perceptions | .18** | |
| Total $R^2$ | | .44**** |

*Note*. $N$ = 165.
a. High scale value equals greater intention to act in favor of censorship.
b. Beta weights from final regression equation with all variables included.
c. Coded as 0 = male, 1 = female.
d. Ranged from 1 (strong Republican) to 7 (strong Democrat).
e. Higher scale values equals greater perceived power of the communications.
f. Higher scale values equals greater perceived negativity of the communications.
**$p$ < .05. ***$p$ < .01. ****$p$ < .001.

controversial products advertising, the analysis of gambling advertising indicates that the perceived effect variables combined to account for a substantial amount of variance in the willingness to censor, even after other variables expected to explain procensorship attitudes were controlled (see Table 3).

Demographic variables, as a block, accounted for 10% of the variance in procensorship attitudes. Specifically, the positive beta weight for gender in the final regression equation indicates that women are more willing to censor

gambling services advertising than are men. Orientational variables also significantly contributed to the equation, accounting for an additional 11% of the variance in willingness to censor advertising for lotteries and casinos. In particular, television news viewing was negatively related to procensorship attitudes. Notably, attitudinal and product use variables did not contribute to the model.

After entering these potential predictors, the variables derived from the estimated susceptibility to and severity of gambling services advertising accounted for an additional 18% of the variance in the equation (over 40% of all the accounted for variance). Notably, the perceived severity variables, as a block, explained 6% of variance above and beyond that explained by the block of perceived susceptibility variables. In this case, the third-person gap in susceptibility contributed significantly to the final prediction of the willingness to censor gambling services advertising. This occurred while also controlling for the total estimated power of the advertising on self and others, which itself was positively related with procensorship attitudes. Furthermore, the third-person gap in severity was a significant predictor of the willingness to censor gambling services advertising, even when accounting for the contribution of total estimated harm on self and others. Thus, for gambling services, both H2a (third-person perception of susceptibility) and H2b (third-person perception of severity) were supported.

## Discussion

The data here strongly suggest that susceptibility and severity are distinguishable perceptual dimensions of the third-person effect. Consistent with theories of risk perception and fear appeals, as well as expectancy-value models of attitudes and behavior, it appears that two appraisal processes underlie assessment of media influence on self and others—a cognitive process of likelihood assessment and an affective process of benefit-harm appraisal (Fishbein, 1963, 1965; Rogers, 1975, 1983; Sandman, 1994; Slovic, 1992). This conclusion is supported by (a) correlational analysis showing these appraisal processes are only partly overlapping; (b) *t* tests demonstrating that individuals perceive differences between themselves and others along both of these dimensions; and (c) hierarchical multiple regressions confirming relations between these perceptual biases and the willingness to censor advertising for controversial products (cigarettes, liquor, and beer) and gambling services (casinos and lotteries).

This study set out, in part, to determine whether individuals estimated others to be both more susceptible to and more severely affected by mass communications than themselves. Tests of H1a and H1b received support across

both types of advertising content considered in this study; statistically meaningful gaps in estimated effects were observed between self and others for susceptibility and severity. However, the magnitude of the third-person gap was far greater for susceptibility than for severity. Thus, it seems that people perceive themselves as much better able than others to avoid being influenced by undesirable messages, but believe there is less of a difference in the adverse consequences of the impact if it were to occur. This seems to be consistent with attributional explanations of the third-person effect, which tend to focus on the susceptibility dimension. It seems, then, that the cognitive mechanisms leading people to view themselves as less vulnerable to undesirable communications than others may not extend to judgments of message severity, because such judgments are the result of a separate, affective perceptual process (Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990).

A distinction between these dimensions appears to be particularly consequential for testing the behavioral components of the third-person effect hypothesis as it relates to the willingness to censor. Tests of H2a received moderate support, with third-person perceptions of susceptibility (the factor typically assessed in third-person effect research) contributing significantly to the equation predicting attitudes toward gambling services advertising, but not to the regression equation for controversial products advertising. Tests of H2b received strong support, with third-person perceptions of severity contributing significantly to both regression equations. That this affective response was found to be an especially good predictor of the willingness to censor is concordant with research indicating negative beliefs have a particularly powerful effect on behavioral intent (Klein, 1991; Richey et al., 1982; Shapiro & Rieger, 1989). These findings support the view that individuals take preventative action only if they attach adverse consequences to the message content (see Perloff, 1993).

Notably, the effects of susceptibility and severity on the willingness to censor were found while also controlling for the total perceived effects (estimated effects on self + estimated effects on others) of these types of advertising. This approach demonstrates that the gap in third-person perceptions accounts for variance in procensorship attitudes above and beyond the effects of its components. This serves as a particularly stringent test of the behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis. Because this study also accounted for the potentially confounding effects of a wide array of demographic, orientational, attitudinal, and product usage variables, the results of the analysis increase our confidence that susceptibility and severity both are consequential for testing the relation between perceptions of media influence and the willingness to censor controversial communications.

Thus, although support for H1a and H1b could be interpreted as a simply supporting a conceptually interesting distinction between susceptibility and severity, their independent effects on the willingness to censor indicate that discriminating between these dimensions has important implications for understanding individuals' behavioral intentions. In general, these findings lend considerable support to our effort to merge insights from protection motivation theory (Rogers, 1975, 1983) with work on the behavioral component of the third-person effect. The data uphold the view that judgments of susceptibility and severity underlie threat appraisals, which, in turn, shape coping strategies to control danger. However, in this research, protection motivation was evidently triggered, at least in part, by a perceived threat to others. This may be due to the fact that the apparent threat—dangerous advertising content—is not grounded in individual behavior but rather is societal in scope. In such instances, individuals are predisposed to view others as more affected than themselves and, therefore, seem particularly likely to respond with a societal-level coping strategy. In the case of undesirable and obtrusive advertising content, people may consider censorship to be an adaptive response that serves the public interest. Therefore, this research extends protection motivation theory in two ways: it recognizes (a) that threat appraisal may not always be focused on the self, and (b) that coping strategies may be impersonal in nature.

It also should be noted that total perceived effects on self and others—in terms of both susceptibility and severity—also were found to be significant predictors of the willingness to censor both types of advertising. It appears, then, that individuals are more likely to favor bans or restrictions on media content either (a) when they estimate others to be more susceptible to and more severely affected by communications than themselves (i.e., "strong paternalism"); or (b) when they estimate that both they and others are susceptible to and severely affected by communications (i.e., "generalized risk perception"). Therefore, future research exploring the behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis should include both the total estimated effects and the gap in estimated effects in models predicting procensorship attitudes.

Scholars examining the desire to censor advertising content also may wish to include measures of product usage in future research, given the negative relation between usage of controversial products and the willingness to censor advertising for cigarettes, liquor, and beer. It may be that exposure to advertising for controversial products is viewed as beneficial by people who smoke and drink, for it provides them with information about product options and legitimizes their decision to use the product. Thus, these people

may not see advertising that features controversial products as necessarily harmful, and they may not fit into the theoretical model in the same way as people who do not use controversial products. Using the language of protection motivation theory, these perceived "rewards" may increase the probability of a "maladaptive response"—in this instance, opposing censorship of these communications. Somewhat similarly, individuals who support the free speech principle—a variable unmeasured in this study—may view the costs of the coping strategy to be too high and therefore may oppose calls for censorship on the grounds that such a behavioral response has negative utility (see Thompson et al., 1990).

The implications of these findings for policy making are clear. Given that perceptions of harmful effects on others have spurred calls for restrictions on advertising of socially sensitive products and services by the public, politicians, and the press, it appears that people's willingness to censor advertising content is a belief apparently built on a misperception. Thus, in the absence of data indicating that exposure to advertising for cigarettes, alcohol, casinos, and lotteries leads people to abuse these legal products, it seems that the relation between third-person perceptions and procensorship attitudes rests, at least partly, on unconfirmed fears of media impact. Policy makers should be wary of letting such misperceptions shape the debate on advertising for legal, but controversial, products and services.

This suggests two important directions for future research. First, scholars should examine whether politicians also exhibit perceptual biases in their estimates of media impact on themselves as compared to the public at large. Differences in estimates of media susceptibility and severity could then be related to individual policy makers' willingness to censor media content as evinced in their voting record, official correspondence, or public speeches (see Baughman, 1989). Second, scholarly efforts should be directed toward determining the actual impact of controversial advertising on the use or abuse of particular products and services so that policy decisions can draw on substantiated research rather than mere speculation about estimated effects.

Obviously, other factors in addition to perceived media influence were predictive of the willingness to censor advertising content. In particular, women were more supportive of limits on advertising for controversial products and gambling services then were men. Older adults were more willing to censor controversial product advertising than were their younger counterparts. For gambling services advertising, broadcast news viewing was found to be negatively associated with the willingness to censor. Overall, our model explained a substantial amount of the individual differences in the willingness to censor, accounting for between 44% to 48% of variance in the criterion

variables, suggesting that the variables in our analysis also had strong predictive power. However, it should be noted that, with the exception of gender, only perceived effect variables consistently contributed to both equations.

Regardless of the fit of these regression models, a substantial amount of variance in procensorship attitudes remains unexplained. Considering that some of the desire to restrict media content can be attributed to beliefs that such content has powerful and negative effects on others, future research should focus on the source of this perception. Some possible considerations might include (a) personal experiences with and affect toward the targeted media content; (b) personality factors not examined in this study, such as locus of control or learned helplessness; or (c) exposure to media coverage critical of the targeted content. Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological issues considered in this research should be tested with a more representative sample of the population. An exploration of these issues using a random sample would strengthen our suggestion here that future third-person effect studies examine both susceptibility and severity dimensions, especially if testing behavioral components of the third-person effect hypothesis.

## Notes

1. An American Academy of Advertising Research Fellowship awarded to the first two authors supported this research. The authors thank Jack McLeod, Robert Hawkins, Albert Gunther, and two anonymous reviewers for thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2. Whereas initial work suggested that estimations of vulnerability to message effects increase as the social distance between the respondents and the "others" grows larger (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988, see also Tyler & Cook, 1984), McLeod et al. (1997) and Shah et al. (1997) point to evidence indicating a "target corollary" should modify the "social distance corollary." These researchers posit that expectations of effects on others are more pronounced if they are thought to be receivers of the message.

3. Cohen and Davis (1991) asked participants to indicate whether their own opinions and the opinions of others would be "more negative" or "more positive" toward a candidate who was the target of political attack advertising. Somewhat similarly, Rucinski and Salmon (1990) measured harm on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all harmful*) to 10 (*very harmful*), and they concurrently measured a second dimension of "influence" on a separate scale. Others also have distinguished between these dimensions: Ognianova et al. (1995) asked questions about both the amount of influence and the direction of the effect, whereas Salwen et al. (1998) called for a distinction between the power of the media and the moral effects of the media. Notably, some third-person research has combined susceptibility and severity in a unified measure. For example, Gunther (1995) and Lee and Yang (1996) asked participants to estimate media impact on self and others by responding to a 5-point scale labeled with the following categories:

a large negative effect, a small negative effect, no effect at all, a small positive effect, and a large positive effect.

4. Rogers (1983) also outlined a separate coping appraisal process composed of assessments of response costs and efficacy judgments. Protection motivation is hypothesized to be a negative function of the costs associated with an adaptive response and a positive function of the perceived efficacy of this coping strategy.

5. This seemingly altruistic explanation for support of censorship may be motivated, in part, by self-interest. It is possible that people favor censorship of communications because they believe the result will be a safer social environment and thus a safer place for them as individuals.

6. For example, the items tapping the willingness to censor cigarette advertising read "Advertisements for cigarettes should be banned" and "There should be restrictions on advertisements for cigarettes." The wording of items tapping attitudes toward censorship of other types of advertising was identical in all respects except for the name of the product or service.

7. For example, the item tapping perceived effects of self read "Advertisements for cigarettes have a powerful effect on me," and the parallel item tapping perceived effects on others read "Advertisements for cigarettes have a powerful effect on many adults." The wording of items tapping perceived effects of other types of advertising was identical in all respects except for the name of the product or service. Notably, much research on third-person perception has chosen to use more specific "others" as targets of perceived effects. Our decision to use the words "many adults" in the effects-on-others questions was prompted by a desire to be broad in defining the people who encounter advertising messages. We acknowledge that a possible consequence of this wording is the potential for some impreciseness in respondents' interpretations of the survey items.

8. When asking individuals to assess the effect of a message on a scale ranging from very negative to very positive, an estimation of message power is arguably inherent in the measure. Likewise, assessments of message susceptibility on a Likert-type scale also may include an estimation of message power. To more closely examine this possibility, individual message severity items were recoded so that a higher scale value indicated a more extreme effect, either positive or negative, and a lower scale value indicated a neutral effect. Individual items were then summed to construct indexes of perceived effects on self and others for controversial product and gambling services advertising. These indexes then were correlated with corresponding susceptibility indexes. For controversial product advertising, the correlation between perceived susceptibility and perceived severity (recoded) was $r = -.06$ (*ns*) for effects on self and $r = .51$ ($p < .001$) for effects on others. For gambling services advertising, the correlation between these two dimensions was $r = -.17$ ($p = .05$) for effects on self and $r = .55$ ($p < .001$) for effects on others. Thus, even with this more stringent test, these perceptual dimensions appear to be clearly discernible in respondents' estimates of message effects on themselves. However, for estimates of message effects on others, this analytic approach yields substantially higher intercorrelations between the two dimensions. Notably, the fact that these intercorrelations are not higher suggests they are distinguishable.

9. Several studies have examined the measurement issues surrounding the third-person effect (Gunther, 1991; McLeod et al., 1997; Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, & Rosenfeld, 1991). For example, Gunther (1995) used a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system to randomize the order of items assessing estimated effects on self and others to avoid artifactual responses, and Price and Tewksbury (1996) addressed this concern by systematically altering the number and sequence of questions experimental participants received. Both studies found robust third-person effects.

10. The standardized difference value was computed by dividing the mean difference by the number of subscales used to create the controversial products measure (three subscales) and gambling services measure (two subscales).

11. The issue of multicolinearity among perceived gap and combined effect variables assessing both susceptibility and severity was not a concern in this analysis. For controversial products advertising, the correlation between the effects gap and the combined effect variables was $r = -.03$ (*ns*) for susceptibility and $r = -.06$ (*ns*) for severity. For gambling services advertising, the correlation between the effects gap and the combined effect variables was $r = -.08$ (*ns*) for susceptibility and $r = .02$ (*ns*) for severity. The correlation between the effects gap for susceptibility and severity was also quite small for both advertising categories: $r = .18$ ($p < .05$) for controversial products and $r = .22$ ($p < .01$) for gambling services. This further supports our contention that these dimensions are conceptually distinct.

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