

FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS: CENSORSHIP AND THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

Hernando Rojas, Dhavan V. Shah and Ronald J. Faber

ABSTRACT

The third person effect hypothesis, which states that individuals exposed to a mass media message will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves, may help to explain the growing trend in support of media censorship. It is suggested here that overestimating the effect of media on others may play an important role in the forces underlying a willingness to restrict various types of communication. To examine this relationship, this study focused on the discrepancy between perceived media effects on others and self, and its relation to pro-censorship attitudes within three major topics: the media in general, violence on television, and pornography. The results of this study support the existence of the third-person effect in mass communication. The findings also indicate that as the gap between perceived first- and third-person effects increases, individuals are more likely to manifest pro-censorship attitudes. This relationship remained for all three topics even when a variety of potentially confounding demographic, media use, and attitudinal variables were controlled. The data also suggest that for pornography the effects gap is related to a willingness to *act* in favor of censoring.

The first amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech. Yet, despite this amendment, there appears to be a growing trend towards the support of censorship for several types of communication. These areas include: pornography (Ritts and Engbretson 1991, Cowan 1992), books (Wellborn 1982, Yudof 1983), the press (Schwartz 1977, Picard 1982), television violence (Rowland 1983) and neo-fascism (Hentoff 1989, Brown 1990).

Expectations about the potentially 'dangerous' effects of communication messages seem to lie at the heart of the censorship phenomenon. One area of research that may shed some light on pro-censorship attitudes is the third-person effect (Davison 1983). According to the third-person effect hypothesis, individuals exposed to a mass media message will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves. Individuals assume that the effects of communication 'will not be on "me" or "you", but on "them"—the

© World Association for Public Opinion Research 1996

third-persons' (Davison 1983, p. 3). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the observer's expectation of the communication's impact may lead that individual to take some action. The third-person effect may lead to greater support for media censorship because of exaggerated expectations about media effects on others.

Advocates for censorship seem particularly likely to be overestimating the effects of media on others—the 'gullible' public. This study argues that the existence of a third-person effect in communication is an important factor contributing to pro-censorship attitudes towards media. The discrepancy between perceived media effects on others and self is expected to contribute to explaining variance in censorship attitudes. This will be examined regarding the media in general, as well as two important areas of media content: violence on television and pornography.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the third-person effect has developed mostly from Davison's (1983) insightful observations rather than from a theoretical model or tradition. Despite researchers' agreement about the existence of the effect and the identification of some of the conditions under which it is manifested, there have been relatively few explanations as to why it occurs. Attempts by Rucinski and Salmon (1990) and Gunther (1991) to account for the third-person effect have placed it in the realm of attribution theory. This *ex post facto* explanation seems reasonable due to similarities between attributional principles and the third-person effect.

The broad body of attribution literature shares the core assumption that people interpret behavior in terms of its causes and that these interpretations play an important role in determining their reactions to this behavior (Jones and Davis 1965, Kelley 1971, Harvey and Weary 1984). Two concepts within attribution theory, the fundamental attribution error and egotistical differential attributions, seem to underlie what has been labeled the third-person effect. According to the fundamental attribution error, when individuals explain the behavior of others, they tend to overlook the impact of situational factors and overestimate the role of personal factors. That is, the behavior of others is attributed to personality traits, while their own is attributed to circumstances. Extensive empirical evidence has demonstrated the fundamental attribution error (Ross 1977, Miller *et al.* 1981, Jones 1990). Gunther (1991, pp. 357–8) explains that 'when judging the impact of the message on others, observers will underestimate the effect of situational (external) factors and attribute relatively more opinion change to those others, but in judging themselves, observers will observe modest, if any, opinion change, attributing it to their greater awareness of, and discounting of, situational factors like persuasive intent.'

The body of research concerned with egotistical differential attributions, or

self-serving biases (Miller 1976, Snyder *et al.*, 1978, Stephan and Gollwitzer 1981), also helps to account for findings in the third-person effect literature. When a message is deemed negative or when being persuaded by it would be generally regarded as unintelligent (e.g. an advertisement), we attribute this external factor (the message) to have more influence on others. This would serve to enhance our perception of personal invulnerability and control. On the other hand, when the message is considered positive (e.g. a public service announcement) we attribute more effects to the self since we are 'smart enough' to recognize its value (see Gunther and Thorson 1992, Gunther and Mundy 1993, Brosius and Engel 1996).

THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

Since Davison's initial assertion, a number of studies have tested the third-person hypothesis both experimentally and through survey methodology. These studies have provided abundant support for the notion that individuals assume that communications exert a stronger influence on others than on themselves (Tiedge *et al.* 1991, Lasorsa 1992, Perloff 1993). Research suggests that people are more likely to systematically overestimate the extent to which others are affected by mass media than they are to underestimate that effect on themselves (Gunther 1991).

Various studies have examined the contingent conditions required for the third-person effect to occur, with one of the largest areas of research exploring the qualifications of self. Lasorsa (1989) observed that the discrepant perception between perceived third- and first-person media effects were greater among those who perceived themselves as experts, without actually being experts, than among those with real political knowledge. Mutz (1989) explored issue-importance and its relationship to the third-person effect. Her study discovered that the tendency to perceive others as more influenced by the mass media was most prominent among those who consider an issue very important.

In examining the speculation that the third-person effect is a result of people on both sides of an issue seeing the media as biased against their own point of view, Perloff (1989) concentrated on determining the conditions under which individuals are particularly inclined to expect that media will influence others. Perloff's study, which grew out of Vallone, Ross, and Lepper's (1985) work on the 'hostile media phenomenon', supported the idea that ego-involvement powerfully influences the perception of mass media effects. Partisans perceive that news media coverage will cause others to become less favorable toward their position than nonpartisans. This perception was discovered to be an inaccurate reflection of reality; a nonpartisan group did not display any significant change in attitudes. Perloff concluded that under highly involving conditions

individuals overestimate the magnitude of media effects on third-persons. A plausible explanation offered by Perloff is that schema-discrepant information captures the attention of the partisans who then regard this information as more persuasive.

While a substantial amount of research has explored qualifications of self, far less has examined qualifications of others. One of the key studies in this area is Cohen, Mutz, Price, and Gunther's (1988) experimental confirmation of the existence of the third-person effect in the context of libel-law. Within an experimental setting, Cohen and his colleagues found that subjects do estimate a defamatory communication to have more effects on other potential readers of the newspaper article than on themselves. In addition, they found that the effect increases as the 'others' become progressively distant from the subject analyzed. Further, when the defamation is attributed to a negatively biased source the discrepancy between perceived media influence on self and on others is greater.

Research has found that elements of the message also influence when third-person effects are likely to occur. These studies indicate that message content judged to be negative or schema-discrepant is thought to influence others more than oneself; however, when the message is consistent with previously held schema or thought to be positive, the third-person effect no longer occurs.

Examining negative political advertising, Cohen and Davis (1991) found a differential impact of communication messages. Subjects reported that they were not influenced by attacks on their candidate, although they thought others would be—a typical third-person effect. However, when they viewed an attack on a candidate they did not like, they perceived themselves to be more influenced than others would—a form of reversed third-person effect.

Exploring the different conditions under which the third-person effect would occur, Gunther and Thorson (1992) looked at product and services advertisements and public services announcements (PSA). They found that for PSAs (a 'positive' form of communication) there was no statistical difference between the perceived third- and first-person effects. On the other hand, when advertisements (a more 'negative' form of communication) were considered, the third-person effect did appear, but as advertisements increased in creating a positive emotion in the viewer, the magnitude of the third-person effect was weaker. Gunther and Thorson's work suggests that 'desirable' messages do not elicit the third-person effect.

Gunther and Mundy (1993) provide additional evidence of this phenomenon, which they refer to as 'biased optimism'. They suggest that people reinforce self-esteem with a bias toward positive personal outcome. The 'benefit likelihood' of a topic determines the existence of the discrepancy between the first- and third-person effect. For beneficial topics, subjects indicated they expected both themselves and others to be more likely to agree; while for harmful topics, the

perceived effect on self and others differs greatly. The third-person effect is therefore contingent on the type of message.

This view is supported by Rucinski and Salmon (1990). In the context of political elections, they found those media messages that elicit a larger difference between perceived effects on self and others were those that are considered harmful to the electoral process. In a study concerning pornography, Gunther (1995) found further support for this perspective. Over 60 percent of individuals in a random national sample estimated others to be more negatively influenced by pornography than themselves, while only 20 percent perceived a more negative effect on themselves than on others. Further, this 'perceived bias' was significantly related to support for restrictions of pornography. His findings also indicate that more highly educated people are more prone to the third-person effect. Thus, it seems that messages considered harmful, dangerous, or more broadly, schema discrepant, are those most likely to elicit the third-person effect in communication.

In his initial conception of the third-person effect, Davison (1983) expressed the belief that this overestimation of the effect of negative or harmful messages would have on others would lead people to take some preventive or compensatory action. While there is some suggestive evidence in a few studies (see Mutz 1989, Rucinski and Salmon 1990), most research that has looked for a behavioral outcome of the third-person effect has failed to detect one (Gunther 1991, Perloff 1993). One explanation for these findings is that people don't exhibit the expected behavior because they may view their perspective as different from the opinion of the general public; a spiral of silence effect inhibits their behavior (Mutz 1989). Thus, behavior may be an outcome of a third-person effect only when people feel very strongly about the topic or when behavior will be covert. As it stands, Gunther's (1995) demonstration of a linkage between the third-person effect and support for restricting pornography provides the only direct indication of a linkage between the third-person effect and the behavioral outcome Davison hypothesized.

CENSORSHIP

Censorship has proven to be an ambiguous concept ranging from explicit legal prohibitions to more subtle forms of economic and social control. Dority (1989) defines censorship as a mind set that aims at protecting us from the perceived harmful effects of what we read, see, and hear. Censors have defended their actions as allegedly protecting our souls from blasphemy, or society from alien political, social, or economic ideas.

Censorship is, and has been, a widely discussed phenomenon, but research on factors contributing to the pro-censorship attitudes has been rather limited

(Worchel *et al.* 1975, Hense and Wright 1992). In addition, individual studies typically consider only one specific type of content subject to censorship demands. Thus, there is little systematic knowledge about the factors that separate those who favor censorship from those who opposed it.

Perhaps because of the varying focus on what is being censored, research on the factors associated with pro-censorship attitudes has tended to yield mixed results. Hense and Wright (1992), in a study among college and high school students, found attitudes towards censorship were significantly correlated with authoritarianism, conservatism, traditional family ideology, and religiosity. They did not find a significant relationship between attitudes towards censorship and political affiliation or the educational level of an individual's parents. When considering gender, they found no relationship with general attitudes towards censorship, but did find women were less accepting of pornography.

Other research supports some of these findings. Ritts and Engbretson (1991) found similar results regarding authoritarianism and gender, and Byrne, Cherry, Lambeth and Mitchell (1973) found support for the relationship between authoritarianism and pro-censorship attitudes. Based on a secondary analysis of data collected by the National Research Center in Chicago, White (1986) discovered that people who professed no religious affiliation were less likely to remove controversial books from public libraries. He found no differences based on gender, but reported that the willingness to censor increased with age and decreased with higher levels of education.

However, some of these assertions contradict the conclusions of other scholars. Erlick (1974) discovered a negative relationship between the educational level of an individual's parents and the willingness to censor. Schell and Bonin (1989), in a study among librarians in Canada, found that pro-censorship attitudes were unrelated to authoritarianism, gender, level of education, and income. Thompson, Chaffee and Oshagan (1990) reported no significant differences between conservatives and liberals in terms of a willingness to censor pornography, while 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.

Thus, the existing literature provides a limited theoretical framework to understand the motivations for censorship. Demographic and ideological predictors provide contradictory results depending on the topic and the population under study. The only commonality across studies is that censorship appears to be associated with the belief that the outcome of a form of communication will be negative. Regardless of political ideologies, the justification for censorship remains the perceived negative effects of the message. Given the importance of perceived negative effects in attitudes toward censorship, it seems reasonable to believe that the third-person effect may be related to censorship beliefs and behaviors.

HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the third-person effect in mass communication and pro-censorship attitudes towards the media and specific media contents. The research results previously discussed suggest different areas of exploration relevant to explaining this relationship.

First, this paper sets out to further demonstrate and validate the third-person effect hypothesis that serves as the basis for this research. In this study, in addition to examining beliefs about the media in general, two media topics which have frequently fueled the censorship debate are discussed. These topics are violence on television and pornography. Given the findings on the third-person effect reported previously, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1a. People will judge media messages in general to have a greater impact on others than on themselves.

Hypotheses 1b and 1c. Additionally, people will perceive pornography and violence on television to have greater impact on others than on themselves.

The next set of hypotheses deals with the relationship between the third-person effect and censorship attitudes. Considerations of messages being harmful are always central to demands for restriction of those messages. Furthermore, research suggests that censors traditionally feel that they are not being adversely affected by the information that they prohibit even though they have been exposed to it repeatedly (Hense and Wright 1992).

If, as previous research shows, the third-person effect is contingent on the type of message and how harmful, or schema-discrepant, the communication is considered to be, it seems plausible that the third-person effect is directly related to pro-censorship attitudes. Gunther's (1995) findings concerning the third-person effect and censorship of pornography lend support to this position. Based on these considerations it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2a. The magnitude of the gap between perceived first- and third-person media effects will be positively related with pro-censorship attitudes.

Hypotheses 2b and 2c. The magnitude of the gap between perceived first- and third-person effects for specific media topics (pornography and violence on television) will be positively related with pro-censorship attitudes on those topics.

Finally, this study addresses the quest for a behavioral component to the third-person effect suggested in Davison's seminal article. He believed preventive

or compensatory action could be expected as a result of the perceived differential impact of the message. However, little evidence has been produced to support this contention. Nevertheless, as Gunther (1991, p. 369) declared, it may be 'premature to discount the behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis'.

Mutz (1989) suggests that when issues are extremely important to people, they will be willing to take action. However, when issues are less important the spiral of silence phenomenon may moderate the potential behavioral outcome of the third-person effect. In such cases, people who exhibit a sizable third-person effect may tend to think that public opinion has been influenced away from their own viewpoint. Consequently, they will not want to engage in public behavior; the spiral of silence will cancel out the third-person effect on behavior (see also Willnat 1996).

However, the third-person effect may lead to a change of attitude, or encourage more private behaviors such as voting decisions. While the spiral of silence may limit a person from acting, it may not limit their desire to see society act. As a result, an important outcome of the third-person effect may be an increased desire to legislate the prohibition of communication which can adversely affect others. In this study, this question is examined only for the issue of pornography. Bearing this in mind, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3. The magnitude of the gap between perceived first- and third-person effects will be positively related with censorship behavior.

METHODS

SUBJECTS

Subjects were recruited from selected groups at a large midwestern university. The groups were specifically selected to represent people who may be particularly concerned with one of the topics of the study. This was done to allow an examination of the impact of the topic salience on the third-person effect, in a non-reactive manner. The groups chosen were ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps for the Army, Navy and Air Force) members, introductory mass communication and advertising students, and students in advanced Women Studies classes. In addition to potential concern with one of the study topics, these groups were chosen because they represented a balance along a conservative to liberal continuum. Though this sample is non-representative, it provides a basis for examining the central questions of this study. The final sample size was comprised of 133 students with 54 ROTC members, 43 introductory mass communication students, and 36 subjects from advanced Women Studies classes. None of the subjects were familiar with the third-person effects theory.

MEASURE

The survey instrument used in this study included eight different types of scales or questions. These were used to measure the key variables, the third-person effect and an individual's willingness to censor, and to control for possible alternative explanations. To minimize reactivity, items from any one scale were interspersed with items from other scales. The vast majority of items were assessed using a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Each of the indices used is discussed below in greater detail.

To measure the gap between perceived first- and third-person effects, subjects were asked to indicate separately how strongly they agreed or disagreed that the media content had a powerful effect on themselves and on other people. Separate items were used to assess opinions about the media in general, pornography, and television violence. The wording of the items was identical except for the first- or third-person connotation. For example, a first-person question stated 'In general the mass media have a powerful effect on my behavior'. The equivalent third-person item was phrased 'In general the mass media have a powerful effect on societal behavior'. Similar questions were also used to assess attitudes. For example, 'Pornographic movies/magazines have a powerful effect on societal attitudes' and 'Pornographic movies/magazines have a powerful effect on my attitudes'. Thus, each type of content was assessed by four items, examining individual and societal level effects on both attitudes and behaviors.

The paired individual and societal level assessments were initially used to test the first set of hypotheses. Subsequently, to establish an individual's gap on each topic, their score on the first-person effect items (effect on themselves) were subtracted from their score on the corresponding third-person effect items. For each content area, separate gap scores were computed for beliefs about effects on attitudes and behaviors. The scores between attitudinal and behavioral gaps were highly correlated (media $r = .50$, $p < .01$; pornography $r = .53$, $p < .01$; violence on television $r = .39$, $p < .01$). Therefore, in the interest of data reduction the gap from the attitude items was added to the one from the behavioral items to obtain the subject's total effect gap for that topic.

To measure subjects' willingness to censor each of the three types of media content, a scale to measure attitudes towards censorship was developed as part of this research. Sixteen items in the form of Likert statements were constructed to be used as a censorship scale. These sixteen items were factor analyzed using a Varimax rotation. This provided a three factor solution with readily interpretable results. These factors represent each of the expected content areas, a general censorship factor, censorship of pornography, and censorship of television violence. The rotated factor matrix is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Factor analysis of censorship items

	<i>Factor loadings</i>		
	<i>General censorship</i>	<i>Censorship of violence</i>	<i>Censorship of pornography</i>
No matter how controversial an idea is, an individual should be able to express it publicly.	-.758	-.077	-.075
Everybody should have full liberty of propagandizing for what they believe to be true.	-.472	-.316	.121
Even though freedom of speech for all groups is a worthwhile goal, it is unfortunately necessary to restrict the freedom of certain groups.	.610	.126	.055
All individuals should have the right to openly express their ideas, no matter how prejudiced they might be.	-.765	-.138	-.056
CDs containing unpopular viewpoints should be kept behind the counter in stores.	.522	.243	.199
College officials should be able to ban persons with extreme views from speaking at campus events.	.558	.004	.105
Demonstrations/rallies by controversial political groups should be restricted.	.659	-.134	.193
Motion pictures that offend any sizable group should be banned.	.328	.418	.231
Network censors should reduce the amount of violence on TV.	.047	.829	.131
Television producers should be able to present brutality to enhance their program's story line.	-.099	-.733	-.133
Today's standards regarding violent content on TV are too lax.	-.002	.716	.319
Legislators should regulate the amount of violence permissible on television.	.213	.751	.248
Magazines like Penthouse and Hustler should be restricted from sale at local convenience stores.	.021	.381	.741
Today's media standards regarding sexually explicit material are too strict.	-.128	-.031	-.764
For pornographers freedom of expression should be restricted.	.187	.358	.763
Chain video stores should make Adult (X-rated) videos available.	-.143	-.206	-.714

The first factor was composed of seven items dealing with general censorship issues. The second factor was composed of five items, four dealing with censorship of violence on television and one item that supported banning offensive motion pictures. The third factor was composed of four items dealing with censorship of pornography.

In the case of each subscale, the negatively loading items were reverse coded, after which the reliability of each subscale was tested. The internal consistency of the overall censorship scale was measured via a Cronbach reliability coefficient yielding an *alpha* of .85. Each of the individual subscales also had high consistency. General censorship had an *alpha* of .76; television violence had an *alpha* of .81; and pornography had an *alpha* of .81. Additive scales were then constructed.

A hypothetical situation was used to assess potential behavioral outcomes of the third-person effect. This involved a referendum on the ban of pornographic materials within a neighboring community. Subjects were asked to state their position on this issue and explain how they would react to the referendum. Other forms of political action besides voting were also probed. An open-ended format was adopted to permit the subjects to explain their position and possible actions without the rigidity of close-ended questions.

The answers to this question were coded to determine the individual's behavioral intention: whether they would vote, how they would vote (for or against the ban); and if they would engage in other forms of political action, such as discussing the issue with others, writing letters to public officials, engaging in campaigns, protests, boycotts or any other action oriented towards the restriction of pornography. Responses were combined to construct the following response categories: 0 = Voting against the ban on pornography or taking no action; 1 = Taking actions to impose restrictions on pornography without banning it; 2 = Voting to ban pornography; and 3 = Voting to ban pornography and taking additional actions in favor of banning and/or restriction. The answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed by two independent coders. There was a 98.2 percent level of agreement.

Four previously validated scales were included in this study to control for factors previously found to affect censorship attitudes. These scales assessed authoritarianism, conservatism, attitudes towards women and religiosity. Ray's (1979) authoritarian personality scale was used to ensure that censorship attitudes were not just a function of authoritarianism. Ray's scale was developed to measure authoritarianism on both sides of the political divide, both conservative and liberal. One of the original 14 items ('I suffer fools gladly') was eliminated because a pilot study showed subjects did not understand it and often failed to answer it. The internal consistency of this authoritarianism scale was measured via a Cronbach reliability coefficient yielding an *alpha* of .71.

Ray's (1983) conservatism scale was used to control for the impact of political orientation. This scale is designed to measure various aspects of liberalism and conservatism. While this scale was constructed for general use, it is especially recommended for studies characterizing a given sample as being either particularly liberal or particularly conservative. Two items of the original scale dealing with censorship were not included because they replicate items from the censorship scale being developed in this study. The internal consistency of the conservatism scale was measured via a Cronbach reliability coefficient yielding an *alpha* of .87.

A shortened version of Spence and Helmreich's (1978) attitude toward women scale was used to determine pro-feminist attitudes. Ten items of the original 15 were selected based on the results of a pilot study. The five items, such as, 'It is ridiculous for a woman to run a locomotive and for a man to darn socks', were eliminated on the basis of no variation among pilot study respondents. The internal consistency of the attitudes towards women scale was measured via a Cronbach reliability coefficient yielding an *alpha* of .88.

Four items from Putney and Middleton's (1961) religiosity importance subscale were adapted for use in this study. The internal consistency of the religiosity scale was measured via a Cronbach reliability coefficient yielding an *alpha* of .87.

Finally, demographic questions regarding age, gender, education of parents, family income, year in school, political party identification, and television usage patterns were assessed. These items were also included for control purposes in the analysis.

RESULTS

TESTS OF HYPOTHESES ONE: THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

Hypotheses 1a, 1b and 1c stated that people would judge the media, pornography, and violence on television to have a greater impact on others than on themselves. The data supported these hypotheses (see Table 2). For all three topics, the mean perceived effect of the communication on others was significantly higher than the mean perceived effect of the communication on self. This was true for both behavioral and attitudinal statements.

To further explore the degree to which the third-person effect occurs, frequencies were run for the measure of the effects gap (third-person effect minus first-person effect). This analysis showed that 84.7 percent of the subjects perceived the mass media to have a greater impact on others, while only 3.8 percent believed they were more effected. Similarly, 82.2 percent stated that violence on television affects others more than them, while only 3.1 percent

TABLE 2 Estimated effects of media in general, pornography and TV violence on attitudes and behavior

	<i>Mean perceived third-person effect</i>	<i>Mean perceived first-person effect</i>	<i>Test statistics^a</i>
Mass media have a powerful effect on behavior	4.24	2.87	$t = 13.55$ $md = 1.37$ $p = .000$ $df = 132$
Mass media have a powerful effect on attitudes	3.92	3.01	$t = 8.81$ $md = .91$ $p = .000$ $df = 130$
Pornographic movies/magazines have a powerful effect on behavior	3.35	2.03	$t = 10.54$ $md = 1.32$ $p = .000$ $df = 128$
Pornographic movies/magazines have a powerful effect on attitudes	3.30	2.38	$t = 7.60$ $md = .92$ $p = .000$ $df = 128$
Television violence has a powerful effect on behavior	3.90	2.32	$t = 15.12$ $md = 1.58$ $p = .000$ $df = 130$
Television violence has a powerful effect on attitudes	3.63	2.69	$t = 9.56$ $md = .94$ $p = .000$ $df = 128$

^a Two-tailed *t*-test, mean differences, probability and degrees of freedom.

Note: Perceived effects were measured on 5 point scales. High means indicate strong perceived effects.

considered violence on television to have a greater impact on them than others; and 71.7 percent estimated pornography to have a greater impact on others, while 7.1 percent perceived pornography to have a greater influence on them. Overall, the data analysis strongly supports hypothesis one, that individuals would judge the media in general, violence on television and pornography to have a greater impact on others than on themselves.

To determine if topic involvement influenced the magnitude of the third-person effect, differences among subject groups were tested. The Women Studies

group was expected to be the most involved with pornography, while the ROTC members were expected to be most involved with violence on television. Based on this, a pair of one-way ANOVAs was performed in which group membership was treated as an independent variable and the effects gap measure for pornography or violence on television alternately served as the dependent variable. For the pornography gap, no two groups were significantly different at the .05 level, though the Women Studies group did have the highest mean effects gap. Similarly, for the violence on television gap, no two groups were significantly different at the .05 level. In this analysis, the mean scores for all three groups were nearly identical. These findings indicate that the third-person effect is not limited to high involvement groups; rather, this effect is a more general phenomenon.

To explore possible conditions that facilitate or hinder the third-person effect, correlations with the demographic, media use, and attitudinal variables included in this study were conducted. Few significant correlations were observed. The media effect gap was negatively related to family income ($r = .22$). The violence on television effect gap was negatively related to hours of watching television ($r = -.21$). Finally, the pornography effect gap was positively related to religiosity ($r = .27$). However, no demographic, media use, or attitudinal variable was correlated with the gaps for all three topics examined in this study (see Table 3).

To establish if differences in the third-person effects gap are due to gender, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted. The mean difference between men and women was not significant for the media effects gap ($t = .41$; 129 *df*; *n.s.*), the violence on television effects gap ($t = .34$; 127 *df*; *n.s.*) or the pornography effects gap ($t = 1.79$; 125 *df*; *n.s.*). Therefore, it appears that no demographic, media use or personality variables seems adequate to account for these gaps.

TESTS OF HYPOTHESES TWO: CENSORSHIP AND THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

Hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c stated that the discrepancy between perceived first- and third-person media effects would be positively related to pro-censorship attitudes. As an initial test of these hypotheses, the correlation between each effects gap and the relevant censorship scale was examined. Small, but significant, positive correlations were found for the media in general ($r = .19$, $p < .05$), and for violence on television ($r = .20$, $p < .05$). A stronger correlation was found between the effects gap and censorship attitudes for the pornography topic ($r = .47$, $p < .01$).

While censorship may be partially a result of the third-person effect, there are many other factors which are also likely to influence the willingness to

TABLE 3 Correlation of demographic, media use and attitudinal variables with third-person effects gaps

	<i>Two-tailed correlation coefficients</i>		
	<i>Media effects gap</i>	<i>TV violence effects gap</i>	<i>Pornography effects gap</i>
Age	-.10	-.05	-.15
Education of parents	.16	.06	.03
Family income	-.22*	.11	.05
Year in school	-.01	-.02	-.10
Political party ID ^a	.10	.05	.10
Hours of TV usage	-.06	-.21*	-.08
Local news viewing	-.07	-.15	-.14
National news viewing	.01	-.05	-.07
Religiosity	.04	.08	.27**
Conservatism	-.11	-.11	-.02
Feminism	.09	.17	.16
Authoritarianism	.11	.07	.04

^a Coded as 0 = republican, 1 = independent, 2 = democrat.

* = $p < .05$

** = $p < .01$.

Note: Effects gaps are the added gaps of estimated effect on behavior and attitudes.

censor. Though the findings are somewhat mixed, research on pro-censorship attitudes (Erlick 1974, White 1986, Hense and Wright 1992) and, more broadly, political tolerance (see Marcus *et al.* 1995) suggests that the willingness to censor is positively associated with age, authoritarianism, conservatism, feminism, and religiosity and negatively associated with family income, education level, educational level of parents, and media use. Further, women and Republicans appear more willing to censor communications than their counterparts.

To test whether the observed zero-order relationships between the willingness to censor and the third-person effect remained robust after accounting for this host of demographic, media use, and attitudinal variables, a multiple regression was run for each topic under study. Fourteen independent variables were grouped in four conceptually distinct blocks: block one consisted of demographic variables (gender, age, education of parents, family income, year in school, and political party ID); block two consisted of media use variables (hours of television viewing, local news viewing, and national news viewing); block three consisted of attitudinal variables (religiosity, conservatism, feminism, authoritarianism); and block four consisted solely of the third-person effect gap for the appropriate topic.

These blocks were entered in sequential multiple regressions with the overall

copyright scale, the censorship of television violence scale and the censorship of pornography scale successively serving as the dependent variable. Within blocks, variables were entered simultaneously. Analysis was performed in this manner for two reasons: first, to examine if the third-person effect gap explained additional variance in pro-censorship attitudes beyond that accounted for by variables conventionally found to be related with the willingness to censor; second, to examine whether the hypothesized relationship remained robust when simultaneously controlling for a variety of variables which may provide possible alternative explanations.

The first regression was run with the overall censorship scale as the dependent variable and the corresponding effects gap as the final independent variable (see Table 4). This analysis demonstrated that the media effects gap was significantly related to the willingness to censor even after accounting for the influence of demographic, media use, and attitudinal variables. The conventional variables did account for a considerable amount of variance in the censorship scale: variables included in the first three blocks explained a combined 23 percent of variance in the measure. In total, the four blocks accounted for 26 percent of variance in the measure. All significant relationships were in the expected direction: women were more willing to censor than men, while age, religiosity and conservatism were positively associated with censorship. Consistent with the perspective offered by many researchers, a particularly important, and statistically significant, variable block was individual attitudes.

Two points should be noted about the relationship between the media effects gap and the overall censorship scale. First, as indicated by the change in *R*-square, the media effects gap explained a significant amount of additional variance in subjects' pro-censorship attitudes beyond that accounted for by the three previously entered variable blocks. Second, the robustness of this relationship is further supported by the standardized *beta* of .19 for the regression equation, which indicates that when simultaneously controlling for all other independent variables, the media effects gap remained a significant predictor of an individual's willingness to censor.

The second regression was run with the censorship of television violence scale as the dependent variable and the corresponding effects gap as the final independent variable (see Table 4). In total, the four blocks accounted for 22 percent of variance in the measure. Of the first three blocks of conventional variables, only the demographics block accounted for a significant amount of variance in the censorship scale. After these three blocks were accounted for, the addition of the TV violence effects gap explained a significant amount of additional variance in subjects' pro-censorship attitudes. Additionally, the robustness of this relationship is demonstrated by the standardized *beta* of .17, which indicates that the TV violence effects gap remained the only significant

TABLE 4 Influence of third-person effect on censorship attitudes and behavior
 Regressions of censorship scales and pro-censorship behavior index on demographic, media use, attitudinal, and third-person effect variables

	Overall censorship ^a		Censorship of TV violence ^a		Censorship of pornography ^a		Pro-censorship behavior index ^a	
	Final beta ^d	Change in R ²	Final beta ^d	Change in R ²	Final beta ^d	Change in R ²	Final beta ^d	Change in R ²
<i>Demographics</i>		.10		.12*		.14**		.16**
Gender ^b	.28*		.17		.24*		.35**	
Age	.23*		.17		.20*		.08	
Education of parents	.05		.01		.12		.10	
Family income	-.12		-.14		-.22*		-.23**	
Year in school	-.12		-.16		-.09		.02	
Political party ID ^c	.07		.15		.10		.15	
<i>Media Use</i>		.03		.04		.02		.01
TV hours	-.12		-.07		-.06		-.10	
Local news viewing	.03		-.05		.12		.09	
National news viewing	-.19		-.08		-.22*		-.08	
<i>Attitudes</i>		.10*		.04		.16***		.11**
Religiosity	.17*		.16		.23**		.19*	
Conservatism	.33**		.00		.28*		.22*	
Feminism	-.03		.02		-.02		-.12	
Authoritarianism	-.04		.11		-.07		-.05	
<i>Third-person effect</i>		.03*		.03*		.10***		.06**
Media effects gap	.19*		—		—		—	
TV violence effects gap	—		.17*		—		—	
Pornography effects gap	—		—		.27**		—	
				.34***				
Total R ²		.26**		.22*		.42***		.34**

Notes:

^a High scale value = greater willingness to censor.

^b Coded as 0 = male, 1 = female.

^c Coded as 0 = republican, 1 = independent, 2 = democrat.

^d Beta weights from final regression equation with all blocks of variables included.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. — not included.

predictor of an individual's willingness to censor television violence in the final regression equation.

The third regression was run the censorship of pornography scale as the dependent variable and the corresponding effects gap as the final independent variable (see Table 4). As was the case in the previous analyses, the effects gap for pornography was significantly related to the willingness to censor even after accounting for the influence of demographic, media use, and attitudinal variables. The conventional variables did account for a substantial amount of variance in the censorship scale: variables included in the first three blocks explained a combined 32 percent of variance in the measure. The demographics block and

individual attitudes block accounted for a significant amount of variance in the censorship of pornography scale. In total, the four blocks accounted for 42 percent of variance in the scale. All significant relationships were in the expected direction: women were more willing to censor than men; age, religiosity and conservatism were positively associated with censorship; family income and national news viewing were negatively related to censorship.

Again, two points should be recognized about the relationship between the pornography effects gap and the censorship of pornography scale. First, the pornography effects gap explained a considerable amount of additional variance—10 percent—in subjects' pro-censorship attitudes beyond that accounted for by the three previously entered variable blocks. Second, the robustness of this relationship is further supported by the standardized *beta* of .34, which indicates that the pornography effects gap was the single greatest predictor of an individual's willingness to censor in the final regression equation.

Overall, the data provides strong support for the perspective that the third-person effect gaps are related to the willingness to censor both the media in general and particular topics. In the first-order correlations, the effects gaps are significantly related to pro-censorship attitudes in all three instances. This relationship remains significant for all three types of media content even after a variety of demographic, media use, and attitudinal variables are controlled.

TESTS OF HYPOTHESIS THREE: BEHAVIORAL OUTCOME AND THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

It was hypothesised that the magnitude of the discrepancy between first- and third-person media effects will be positively related to censorship behavior. In order to examine this question, the results of the subjects' responses to the referendum on whether to ban pornography in a 'neighboring community' were used. The inductively derived categories used as an index of pro-censorship behavior were correlated with the effects gap for pornography. The correlation was positive and statistically significant ($r = .44$, $p < .001$). This result supports Davison's (1983) contention that action could be expected as a result of the perceived differential impact of the message.

In line with the analysis of hypothesis two, a multiple regression was run to examine the robustness of the observed zero-order relationship. Again, the fourteen independent variables were grouped in four conceptually distinct blocks: demographic variables, media use variables, attitudinal variables, and the pornography effect gap. The index of pro-censorship behavior served as the dependent variable (see Table 4).

For the pro-censorship behavior index, the pornography effects gap was significantly related to the intention to act even after accounting for the influence

of demographic, media use, and attitudinal variables. The conventional variables did account for a substantial amount of variance in the behavior index: variables included in the first three blocks explained a combined 28 percent of variance in the measure. The demographics block and individual attitudes block accounted for a significant amount of variance in the behavior index. All significant relationships were in the expected direction: women were more willing to censor than men; religiosity and conservatism were positively associated with censorship; family income was negatively related to censorship.

The addition of the pornography effects gap explained a significant amount of additional variance—6 percent—raising the total amount of variance accounted for to 34 percent. The robustness of this linkage is further supported by the standardized *beta* of .27, which indicates that the pornography effects gap remained a key predictor of an individual's intent to act in support of censorship in the final regression equation.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study support the existence of the third-person effect in mass communication. Furthermore, the findings indicate that as the gap between perceived first- and third-person effects increases, individuals are more likely to manifest pro-censorship attitudes. These conclusions are based on findings across three different mass communication topics. The data also suggest that this gap is related to an intent to act in favor of censorship of pornography. The consistency of these findings increases confidence in the theoretical relationship suggested by this study.

In tests of hypotheses 1a, 1b, 1c, the overall pattern of perceived first- and third-person effects strongly supports the perspective that individuals believe the media has greater influence on others than on themselves. The perception of effects on others was significantly greater than perceived effect on ones-self for all the attitudes and behaviors examined. For pornography and violence on television, the effects gap was relatively consistent across the three groups.

In tests of hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c, the pattern of results supports the central theoretical argument proposed by this study—a relationship between the third-person effect and pro-censorship attitudes. It seems that individuals who perceive the media as having a greater effect on others than on themselves will be more likely to manifest attitudes towards the limitation of the 'dangerous' or 'deviant' message. A significant relationship was found between the willingness to censor and the three effects gaps. The contribution of the effects gaps was significant for the media in general, violence on television and pornography even after the impact of demographic, media use, and personality variables was accounted for.

As previous research suggests, the third-person effect appears to be contingent on the message being perceived as potentially harmful. This perception also seems central to the advocacy for censorship. Therefore, it seems probable that when an individual interprets a mass media message as being harmful to society, yet personally believes he/she is less affected by it, an expected outcome would be a willingness to censor. These individuals would be acting against something they recognize as 'dangerous' or 'deviant' for society, something they are clever or smart enough to recognize and counter. This would be consistent with the ego defensive attributional bias.

The final hypothesis examined by this study yielded some interesting preliminary findings. The third-person effect gap was related to an intent to act in support of censorship, even when a variety of personality, media use, and demographic variables were controlled. This supports the idea that self-other disparities may influence behaviors as well as attitudes. This is consistent with the speculation of Davison (1983) that preventive or compensatory action could be expected as a result of the perceived differential impact of the message.

There are several limits to the generalizability of this study's results. First, the non-random nature of the sample must be considered. Clearly, this sample is not representative of the broader student population, nor of society in general. The sample was purposefully chosen for the purpose of testing these particular issues. As a result, conclusions regarding the general population should be limited. However, the theoretical relationship observed should not be discounted, especially considering the consistency of the findings across various tests. Nonetheless, these findings should be tested using a broader sample before wide scale generalizations can be made.

IMPLICATIONS AND VENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study support the third-person effect hypothesis and offer evidence of its relationship with the censorship phenomenon. A significant part of the apprehension caused by media effects results from the overestimation of its effects on others. This knowledge has direct implications for public policy concerning speech and its limitations. If part of the public drive to curtail certain types of messages results from the third-person effect, policy debates have to recognize this and concentrate on measuring actual media effects and not perceived media effects.

The theoretical relationship discovered between the third-person effect gaps and procensorship attitudes deserves further exploration. Beyond testing this question using more generalizable samples, researchers may wish to explore whether the third-person effect gap is related to other censurable topics, such as school books, and hate speech. This may also be particularly applicable to a

number of advertising issues including the use of advertising for potentially 'harmful' products such as cigarettes and alcohol, and the use of specific techniques such as negative political ads or host selling. Additionally, the third-person effect gap may help to explain the outcry against some targeting efforts in advertising aimed at minority groups.

Finally, researchers interested in the third-person effect phenomenon should explore the behavioral component with greater scrutiny. This study examined reported behavior for a hypothetical situation. Additional research should examine actual behavior in both naturally occurring and experimentally controlled situations. In general, future research examining the third-person effect would appear to have great promise in explaining both ethical attitudes regarding media practices and individual and even regulatory actions to limit them.

REFERENCES

- Brosius, H.-B. and Engel, D. (1996): 'The causes of third-person effects: Unrealistic optimism, impersonal impact, or generalized negative attitudes towards media influence?', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 8, in this issue.
- Brown, D. (1990): 'Racism and race relations in the University', *Virginia Law Review*, 76, 295-335.
- Byrne, D., Cherry, F., Lamberth, J. and Mitchell, H. (1973): 'Husband-wife similarity in response to erotic stimuli', *Journal of Personality*, 41, 385-94.
- Cohen, J. and Davis, R. G. (1991): 'Third-person effects and the differential impact in negative political advertising', *Journalism Quarterly*, 68, 680-8.
- Cohen, J., Mutz, D., Price, V. and Gunther, A. (1988): 'Perceived impact of defamation: An experiment on the third-person effect', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 52, 161-73.
- Cowan, G. (1992): 'Feminist attitudes toward pornography control', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 16, 165-77.
- Davison, W. P. (1983): 'The third-person effect in communication', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47, 1-13.
- Dority, B. (1989): 'Feminist moralism, "pornography" and censorship', *The Humanist*, Nov/Dec, 8-46.
- Erlick, A. C. (1974): *Freedom to Read Issues*, West Lafayette, IN, Measurement and Research Center, Purdue University.
- Gunther, A. (1991): 'What we think others think', *Communications Research*, 18, 355-72.
- Gunther, A. (1995): 'Overrating the X-rating: The third-person perception and support for censorship of pornography', *Journal of Communication*, 45:1, 27-38.
- Gunther, A. and Mundy, P. (1993): 'Biased optimism and the third-person effect', *Journalism Quarterly*, 70, 58-67.
- Gunther, A. and Thorson, E. (1992): 'Perceived persuasive effects of product commercials and public service announcements: Third-person effects in new domains', *Communication Research*, 19, 574-96.

- Harvey, J. and Weary, G. (1984): 'Current issues in attribution theory and research', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 35, 427-59.
- Hense, R. and Wright, C. (1992): 'The development of the attitudes toward censorship questionnaire', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 22, 1666-75.
- Hentoff, N. (1989): 'Free speech on campus: Racist students have the right to speak or write what they wish', *The Progressive*, May, 12-4.
- Jones, E. (1990): *Interpersonal Perception*, New York, Freeman.
- Jones, E. and Davis, K. (1965): 'From acts to dispositions: The attribution process in person perception'. In L. Berkowitz (ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 2, New York, Academic Press, pp. 220-66.
- Kelley, H. H. (1971): *Attribution in Social Interaction*, Morristown, NJ, General Learning Press.
- Lasorsa, D. L. (1989): 'Real and perceived effects of "Amerika"', *Journalism Quarterly*, 66, 373-8.
- Lasorsa, D. L. (1992): 'Policymakers and the third-person effect'. In J. D. Kenamer (ed.) *Public Opinion, The Press, and Public Policy*, New York, Praeger, pp. 163-75.
- Marcus, G. E., Sullivan, J. L., Theiss-Morse, E., Wood, S. (1995): *With Malice Towards Some: How People Make Civil Liberties Judgments*, New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, D. (1976): 'Ego involvement and attributions for success and failure', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34, 901-6.
- Miller, A., Jones, E. and Hinkle, S. (1981): 'A robust attribution error in the personality domain', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 17, 587-600.
- Mutz, D. (1989): 'The influence of perception of media influence', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 1, 3-24.
- Perloff, R. M. (1989): 'Ego involvement and the third-person effect of televised coverage', *Communication Research*, 16, 236-62.
- Perloff, R. M. (1993): 'Third-person effect research 1983-1992: A review and synthesis', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 5, 167-84.
- Picard, R. (1982): 'Self-censorship threatens U.S. press freedom', *Index on Censorship*, 2, 15-7.
- Putney, S. and Middleton, R. (1961): 'Dimensions of religious ideology', *Social Forces*, 39, 285-90.
- Ray, J. J. (1979): 'Does authoritarianism of personality go with conservatism?', *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 31, 9-14.
- Ray, J. J. (1983): 'A scale to measure conservatism of American public opinion', *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 119, 293-4.
- Ritts, V. and Engbretson, R. O. (1991): 'College student attitudes toward adult materials and the legal rental of adult videos', *College Student Journal*, 25, 440-50.
- Ross, L. (1977): 'The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process'. In L. Berkowitz (ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, New York, Academic Press, pp. 174-214.
- Rowland, W. D. (1983): *The Politics of TV Violence: Policy Uses of Communication Research*, Beverly Hills, CA, Sage.

- Rucinski, D. and Salmon, C. (1990): 'The "other" as the vulnerable voter: a study of the third-person effect in the 1988 U.S. presidential campaign', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 2, 345-68.
- Ryan, M. and Martinson, D. L. (1986): 'Attitudes of college newspaper advisers toward censorship of the student press', *Journalism Quarterly*, 63, 55-60.
- Schell, B. and Bonin, L. (1989): 'Factors affecting censorship by Canadian librarians', *The Journal of Psychology*, 123, 357-67.
- Schwartz, A. (1977): 'Danger: Pendulum swinging: Using the courts to muzzle the press', *The Atlantic Monthly*, February, 29-34.
- Snyder, M., Stephan, W. and Rosenfeld, D. (1978): 'Attributional egotism'. In J. Harvey, W. Ickes and R. Kidd (eds.) *New Directions in Attribution Research*, Vol. 2, pp. 91-117.
- Spence, J. and Helmreich, R. (1978): *Masculinity & Femininity: Their Psychological Dimensions, Correlates & Antecedents*, Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Stephan, W. and Gollwitzer, P. (1981): 'Affect as a mediator of attributional egotism', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 17, 442-458.
- Thompson, M. E., Chaffee, S. H. and Oshagan, H. H. (1990): 'Regulating pornography: A public dilemma', *Journal of Communication*, 40:3, 73-83.
- Tiedge, J. T., Silverblatt, A., Havice, M. J. and Rosenfeld, R. (1991): 'Discrepancy between perceived first-person and perceived third-person mass media effects', *Journalism Quarterly*, 68, 141-54.
- Vallone, R., Ross, L. and Lepper, M. (1985): 'The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 49, 577-85.
- Wellborn, S. (1982): 'As drive to ban books spreads in U.S.', *U.S. News & World Report*, March 8, 66.
- White, H. (1986): 'Majorities for censorship', *Library Journal*, 111, 31-8.
- Willnat, L. (1996): 'Mass media and political outspokenness in Hong Kong: Linking the third-person effect and the spiral of silence', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 8, in this issue.
- Worchel, S., Arnold S. and Baker, M. (1975): 'The effects of censorship on attitude change: The influence of censor and communication characteristics', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 5, 227-39.
- Yudof, M. (1983): *Censorship Litigation and the Schools*, Chicago, American Library.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Hernando Rojas received his Masters degree from the University of Minnesota, School of Journalism and Mass Communication. He is currently teaching at the University of Andes, Bogota, Colombia.

Dhavan V. Shah is a doctoral student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. His main research areas concern psychological approaches to the study of political communication.

Ronald J. Faber is Professor of Mass Communication and Co-Director of the Communication Research Division at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. His major fields of research are consumer behavior and political communication.