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Support for Censorship of Violent and Misogynic Rap Lyrics

An Analysis of the Third-Person Effect

Recent calls for censorship of rap music have demonstrated the need to test the perceptual and especially the behavioral components of Davison's third-person effect hypothesis. The hypothesis states that people perceive media content to have a greater impact on others than on themselves (perceptual component), and that these perceptions lead people to take actions, such as censorship, to prevent the impact (behavioral component). Results of a survey of college students (N = 202) using rap lyrics as the context revealed strong support for both components of the hypothesis. Limited support was found for the social distance corollary of the perceptual component, while the knowledge corollary of the perceptual component was not supported. A new target corollary to the perceptual component was proposed; it predicts that those groups seen as likely targets of a communication will produce larger third-person perceptions than will generalized others.

> [Censors] are never worried about their own ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality, to resist being seized by uncontrollable urges to commit violent or immoral acts, or to remain decent, law-abiding human beings who do not wish to hurt or degrade others. But they are *very* worried about *your* ability to do so.
> —(Dority, 1991, p. 44; italics in original)

During the last decade or so in the United States, many people have expressed concern that rap music—especially rap with violent or misogynic lyrics—is harmful to not only the youth of society but also to society itself

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(Leo, 1993). Prominent politicians, including presidential candidates in the 1996 primary campaign, have called for record companies to engage in self-censorship to protect people from the negative effects of antisocial lyrics ("Time Warner," 1995). In response to such demands, some record company executives have cloaked themselves in the First Amendment (Bowman, 1992) and some have made concessions such as labeling or self-censorship (Dority, 1991; "Time Warner," 1995). The discourse surrounding this controversy is rarely based on research about the negative impact of rap music. Instead, it is founded primarily on perceptions of rap's powerful harmful effects on others. Research on the third-person effect suggests that individuals who advocate censorship believe in powerful effects on others but, ironically, not necessarily on themselves. In short, many people believe that they are able to resist negative media effects but that others are less capable (or willing) to do so and must be protected by censorship.

Formalized over a decade ago by public opinion researcher W. Phillips Davison, the third-person effect hypothesis states:

> People will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others. More specifically, individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication . . . will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than themselves. And whether or not these individuals are among the *ostensible* audience for the message, the impact that they expect this communication to have on others may lead them to take some action. (Davison, 1983, p. 3; italics in original)

The third-person effect hypothesis has two components: perceptual and behavioral. The perceptual component (or third-person *perceptions*), which has received frequent research attention and considerable empirical support, states that people will estimate the effects of media messages on themselves to be less than the effects on others. This first component of the third-person effect, however, is at most an interesting perceptual phenomenon. The perceptual tendency predicted by the third-person effect becomes more meaningful if it is linked with real-world consequences as hypothesized by Davison.

The behavioral component, which has typically been ignored by theorists and rarely tested by researchers (Mutz, 1994), proposes that these perceptions of media impact will lead to behavior intended to protect the public from perceived negative effects. Other studies have suggested that third-person perceptions held by public officials can lead them to take policy actions to quell public outcries (Cook et al., 1983). Although third-person perceptions may have many implications for public policy, the present study examines

one behavioral component—expressed support for censorship of allegedly harmful media content.

The purpose of this analysis, which is part of a larger study of the third-person effect, is to replicate findings on third-person perceptions and to add to the small but growing pool of evidence on the behavioral component. This study examines the relationship between third-person perceptions in the context of violent and misogynic rap lyrics and support for censorship of this content.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Evidence of Third-Person Effects: The Perceptual Component

The past decade has brought about numerous tests of the perceptual component of the third-person effect hypothesis using several different methodologies, including sample surveys and experiments. Researchers have examined third-person perceptions from media content such as libelous newspaper articles, pornography, the television movie *Amerika*, product advertisements, public service announcements, and various forms of political communication.

According to Perloff (1993), 13 of the 14 studies on the third-person effect at that time found support for the perceptual component of the hypothesis. Recent research has continued to demonstrate support (e.g., Gunther & Hua, 1996; Lee & Yang, 1996; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1996). In the initial formulation, Davison (1983) suggested that third-person perceptions were caused by the overestimation of effects on others but relatively accurate estimates of effects on self. For the most part, the literature indicates that people do in fact overestimate the effects of media content on others (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Gunther, 1991; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Perloff, Neuendorf, Giles, Change, & Jeffres, 1992; Price et al., 1996). This is consistent with the literature on pluralistic ignorance showing that people are typically inaccurate in their perceptions of the climate of opinion (e.g., Miller & Prentice, 1994; O'Gorman, 1986; Toch & Klofas, 1984). However, the evidence on whether people can accurately assess media effects on themselves is mixed, with some studies finding underestimates of effects on self (Cohen et al., 1988), some finding relatively accurate estimates (Gunther, 1991; Perloff et al., 1992), and some finding overestimates (Gunther & Thorson, 1992).

One condition for the perceptual effect is that the media impact must be perceived to be negative by respondents (Gunther & Mundy, 1993). This

condition is especially important because it supports assertions (e.g., Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Gunther & Thorson, 1992) that third-person perceptions are a special case of the "it can't happen to me" syndrome, identified in social psychology under terms such as "unrealistic optimism" (Weinstein, 1980). In fact, messages believed to produce positive effects may cause a "reverse third-person effect" (Gunther & Thorson, 1992). Both third-person perceptions and reverse third-person perceptions can be explained by a general tendency for people to fall prey to some form of self-serving bias (e.g., Brown, 1986; Zuckerman, 1979), which leads people to compare themselves favorably to others for ego enhancement reasons.[1]

We expected to replicate previous findings of the perceptual component of the third-person effect. Using antisocial messages in the form of either violent or misogynic rap lyrics, in which we presume respondents to perceive negative effects, we predicted the following:

H1: Perceived effects of antisocial rap lyrics on others will be greater than perceived effects on self.

Davison (1983) noted, "In the view of those trying to evaluate the effects of a communication, its greatest impact will not be on 'me' or 'you,' but on 'them'—the third persons" (p. 3). Consistent with Davison's intuition, Cohen et al. (1988) found that the size of the third-person perception differential increased as the social distance between self and other increased. That is, respondents assessed increasingly larger media impact as the "other" was changed from "other Stanford students" to "other Californians" to "public opinion at large."

Since this initial research, several studies have addressed the social distance corollary of the third-person perception. Gunther (1991) found that University of Minnesota students perceived greater effects on "other Minnesota residents" than on "other University of Minnesota students," which is consistent with the social distance corollary. However, Cohen and Davis (1991), using "people from your home state," "people from your region of the country," and "people in the U.S. in general" as the comparison groups in their study, found no support for increased third-person perceptions for more socially distant groups.

Despite Cohen and Davis's (1991) null findings, we expected to find an effect of social distance on the strength of third-person perceptions. Because individuals are likely to believe they are more similar to members of their own social group than to members of other social groups (Brewer & Kramer, 1985), it is possible that the size of the third-person effect will increase as the social distance between self and other increases. We expected that

respondents would perceive the social distance between themselves and other groups to increase as they moved from students at their own university (due to similarities in age, geography, and academic interests) to youths from New York and Los Angeles (due to age similarities) to the "average person," an analog to Cohen et al.'s (1988) "public opinion at large" or Cohen and Davis's (1991) "people in the U.S. in general." Therefore, our predictions are informed by the social distance corollary as follows:

H2: The size of the third-person perception will increase as the social distance of the comparison group increases.

Finally, research hints that third-person perceptions are linked to perceived knowledge about the content area (Lasorsa, 1989). However, measures of actual knowledge have been found to be unrelated to third-person perceptions (Lasorsa, 1989; Price & Tewksbury, 1994). The logic behind this knowledge corollary is that perceptions of oneself as more knowledgeable about a topic should lead to perceptions that one is better able to defend against negative media effects and thus is less easily influenced than novices. Therefore, we predicted that students who perceived themselves to be more knowledgeable about rap music would be particularly susceptible to third-person perceptions.

H3: Perceived knowledge of rap music will be positively associated with third-person perceptions.

Evidence of Third-Person Effects: The Behavioral Component

The behavioral component states that third-person perceptions will lead to actions to redress negative media effects, such as censorship (or support for censorship) or public policy changes (Davison, 1983). Despite the fact that most studies have tested this hypothesis as third-person perceptions (not simply perceived effects on self or others), few have explained why this is the appropriate test. We assert that the reason one would expect the third-person effect differential to be a stronger predictor of censorship attitudes than either of the perceived effects on self or perceived effects on others components is based on the nature of people who support or engage in censorship.

Salmon (1989, p. 38) has noted that social interventions that "do not consider the person's capacity to make an informed decision" are instances of "strong paternalism." In our view, censorship of media content is the epitome of strong paternalism in social intervention because it inherently

assumes that people are not capable of screening content for themselves and, if they are exposed, they (or society) will be harmed in some way. We believe that censorship is based on this paternalistic foundation.

It has been argued that censorship is supported by people in order to protect relatively "helpless" others (e.g., Dority, 1991; Frohnmayer, 1994). Censorship advocates do not see a need for censorship for themselves because they either are smart enough to resist negative effects or can simply avoid harmful media content when necessary. In the view of a censor, it is those who are not "smart enough" or "wholesome" enough to do the right thing who need the protection that censorship provides. This seems to set up a necessary comparison of self and other. Indeed, Frohnmayer (1994, p. 47) discusses censorship as being closely linked to "the urge to be ethically pure, morally superior," especially in times of social stress. Similarly, Dority (1991) states, "The censor's most visible and striking characteristic is a flagrantly displayed belief in his or her own moral and spiritual superiority" (p. 44). Davison (1983) himself notes, "Insofar as faith and morals are concerned, at least, it is difficult to find a censor who will admit to having been adversely affected by the information whose dissemination is to be prohibited. . . . It is the general public that must be protected" (p. 14). In all of these comments about the characteristics of censors it is clear that there is a comparison with others, since superiority is an inherently relative concept. Thus it should not be simple perceived effects of media content on others but the perceived effects of media on others relative to oneself that spurs people to support censorship.

The paternalistic perception of superiority may be another manifestation of the illusion of control (Langer, 1975) or general self-serving bias (Brown, 1986), of which, as we noted above, the third-person effect may be a special case. That is, censors believe that the content is not dangerous to themselves personally (because they are immune to influence) but that others lack the self-control, knowledge, intelligence, goodness, and so on to protect themselves from harmful media content. Just as third-person perceptions may be founded on a need to maintain an illusion of control or superiority over others, Frohnmayer (1994) notes that censorship is also "an issue of control, of power over what others will or will not have the opportunity to experience" (p. 47). It may be, then, that this illusion of control that generates third-person perceptions could also lead people to want to take control over others, meaning that the link between third-person perceptions and behaviors is spurious. Unfortunately, we will not be able to test the possibility of spuriousness in the present study.

Gunther (1995) argues that people consider the level of media impact on themselves—whatever the level that happens to be—to be acceptable. Their judgment of an unacceptable level of influence is made by comparison to the

acceptable (presumably inconsequential) impact on themselves. The more unacceptable the impact on others—that is, the greater relative to themselves—the more likely they are to support censorship to protect others. This interpretation is consistent with our paternalism argument. Essentially, people feel that the level of effect media have upon themselves is acceptable, but any deviation from this level toward greater effects is harmful. The greater the deviation from effects on themselves, the greater the need for censorship.

In summary, it is not simply the perceived impact of media content on oneself or on others that should lead to support for censorship. Instead, support for censorship should be most prevalent among those who hold the paternalistic or morally superior perception that they are relatively immune to the negative effects of media content compared to the masses (the third-person perception).[2]

Only a few studies have directly tested the behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis (Mutz, 1994), and only very recently have researchers tested the relationship between third-person perceptions and the desire for censorship. Thompson, Chaffee, and Oshagan (1990) found that perceptions of the negative effects of pornography on others were *negatively* associated with desire for censorship, but they did not fully interpret what they admitted was an unexpected finding. Although this finding would seem contrary to the third-person effect hypothesis, their research did not actually test the relationship between third-person perceptions and desire for censorship. As we have noted, the desire for censorship should be related to the *difference* between perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others (i.e., third-person perceptions), so Thompson et al.'s finding should not be interpreted as evidence against the behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis.

Rucinski and Salmon (1990), however, did test the behavioral component of the third-person effect by examining the relationship between third-person perceptions and support for independent monitoring of political media content. Although their dependent variable is not truly censorship of the offensive media content, the finding is applicable. They found that neither perceived effects on self nor third-person perceptions had an impact on support for monitoring. Perceived effects on others did have a small positive effect. This finding is inconsistent with the behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis.

Two published studies provide evidence supporting the relationship between third-person perceptions and desire for censorship. Gunther's (1995) national study of pornography indicated that the size of third-person perceptions was positively related to favoring restrictions on pornographic material,

although perceived effects on self also made a strong contribution. The relationship between third-person perceptions and regulation of pornography was even stronger when Gunther excluded participants who did not demonstrate the third-person perception for pornographic content.

Similarly, Rojas, Shah, and Faber (1996) demonstrated that third-person perceptions were positively associated with the desire to censor violence on television, and pornography, and support for censorship in general. In addition, they found that a measure of hypothetical censorship behaviors was also strongly predicted by third-person perceptions.[3]

The present research was designed to provide an additional test of the relationship between the perceptual and behavioral components of the third-person effect hypothesis and to clarify whether it is perceived effects on self, perceived effects on others, or the third-person perception that is most strongly related to censorship attitudes. Following Davison (1983), Gunther (1995), and Rojas et al. (1996), we predicted:

H4: Third-person perceptions about the effects of rap will be positively associated with support for censorship of rap.

Method

Questionnaires were administered to 202 students in two introductory mass communication courses at the University of Delaware.[4] These courses draw students from a wide variety of academic majors (62% of the respondents were from majors other than communication); however, the sample was disproportionately female (70%). The mean age of respondents in this sample was just over 20 years old.

Respondents were randomly given one of two versions of a nine-page questionnaire, which were identical except for the third page.[5] This page presented the stimulus material—rap lyrics adapted from actual songs. One set of lyrics constituted the violent rap stimulus; the other constituted the misogynic rap stimulus. The different stimuli were used to provide more than one context for third-person effects. The violent stimulus portrays the life of a "gangsta" who is not afraid to use a gun to settle his problems. In the misogynic stimulus, a man uses a woman for sex but is embarrassed to be seen with her in public; he clearly treats her as little more than temporary sexual gratification.

Lyrics were chosen that celebrated values considered by the authors to be antisocial. In order to test whether our respondents also considered the lyrics antisocial (thus enabling a third-person perception), respondents were asked

to rate their perceptions of the lyrics on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*very antisocial*) to 10 (*very prosocial*). Both sets of lyrics were considered antisocial by respondents (M = 1.98 and M = 2.04 for violent and misogynic lyrics, respectively).

Respondents were instructed to read the lyrics carefully and encouraged to refer back to them as they filled out the remainder of the questionnaire. Following the lyrics and the social desirability question were the items used to create four scales for the third-person perceptions measures. Respondents were asked to estimate the effects of "listening to songs with these types of lyrics" on the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of each of the following referent groups: "you," "other University of Delaware students," "people your age in cities like New York and Los Angeles," and "the average person."[6]

The instrument used to measure third-person perceptions was an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*no effect*) to 10 (*a great deal of effects*). Perceived effects on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors were summed to create the scales for each referent group (effects on self Cronbach's α = .79, effects on Delaware students α = .82, effects on New York/Los Angeles youth α = .85, effects on the average person α = .85). These four scales are used in the analyses displayed in Table 1. Difference scores between self and each of the three comparison groups were also computed to represent third-person perceptions. The reliabilities for the self versus Delaware students, self versus average person, and self versus New York/Los Angeles youth were .61, .60, and .74, respectively.[7]

The next set of measures was seven items used to create the support for censorship scale (α = .87). Subjects were asked to think again about the song lyrics as they responded to the seven (5-point) Likert-type items. The seven statements dealt with support for industry self-censorship, banning airplay during hours when children might be listening, support for federal or local laws, and banning sale of the content.

A single item was used to measure perceived knowledge of rap music. Subjects were asked how knowledgeable they were about each of several types of music using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*a great deal*).

Due to their expected relationship to censorship attitudes and third-person perceptions, three additional variables (gender, conservatism, and liking of rap) were measured and used as controls in the regression analysis. Conservatism was created by summing responses to two items asking about respondents' political orientations on social and economic issues (r = .53). For both items, 7-point scales ranging from *very liberal* to *very conservative* were used to measure responses. Two items also were used to measure liking of rap. The first indicator in the scale was part of a set of items that asked respondents to rank order by preference nine different music types, one of

Table 1
t Tests of Differences Between Perceived Effects on Self and Delaware Students, New York/Los Angeles Youth, and the Average Person

	Self versus	Comparison Group: Delaware Students	Comparison Group: New York/ Los Angeles Youth	Comparison Group: Average Person
Violent rap (df = 98-100)	5.56	8.96	15.14	8.74
Misogynic rap (df = 98)	3.26	8.17	12.75	7.46
Total (df = 197-199)	4.43	8.58	13.95	8.10

Note. Mean figures for the self reported here are based on the comparison with the largest number of cases possible. Significance tests are based on the actual number of cases in the analysis. All differences between self and the three comparison groups (for the total sample as well as for the violent rap and misogynic rap subsamples) are significant at the $p \leq .01$ level.

which was rap. Rankings for this item were reversed so that higher values represented greater preference for rap compared to other musical genres. The second indicator was part of a group of items that asked respondents how much they liked each of the nine music types using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*a great deal*). These two items (r = .79) were standardized and then summed to create the liking of rap variable.

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, t tests of the size of the difference between perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others were conducted. Hypothesis 3 was tested using bivariate correlational analysis. Hypothesis 4 was tested using a regression technique called the "diamond model" as advocated by Whitt (1983) for dealing with hypotheses that predict an effect for a difference score variable (third-person perceptions in this case) above and beyond the effects of its components (perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others). For the regression analyses in Table 2, the final block of variables entered into the equations contain the self plus other variable and the third-person perception variable for each of the three comparison groups. According to Whitt (1983), when these two variables are entered simultaneously into a regression equation, a significant effect for the difference score variable should be interpreted as support for the hypothesis.

Results

Hypotheses 1-3: The Perceptual Component

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the perceived effects of the rap lyrics on others would be greater than perceived effects on self. Table 1 presents the results of t tests that demonstrate strong support for this hypothesis. Overall, the

Table 2
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Model Predicting Attitudes Toward Censorship of Rap Lyrics

	Comparison Group		
Independent Variable	Delaware Students	New York/ Los Angeles Youth	Average Person
Block 1			
Gender (female)			
β1	.11	.11	.11
β2	.11	.12	.10
Conservatism			
β1	.27**	.27**	.27**
β2	.24**	.23**	.24**
R^2 (%)	7.5**	7.5**	7.5**
Block 2			
Social desirability			
β1	−.10	−.10	−.10
β2	−.03	.00	−.05
Incremental R^2 (%)	0.9	0.9	0.9
Block 3			
Liking of rap			
β1	−.13	−.13	−.13
β2	−.11	−.11	−.10
Knowledge of rap			
β1	−.02	−.02	−.02
β2	−.05	−.06	−.03
Incremental R^2 (%)	1.8	1.8	1.8
Block 4			
Self + other perceptions			
β2	.04	.07	.05
Third-person perceptions			
β2	.17*	.22**	.15*
Incremental R^2 (%)	2.8*	5.6**	2.3
Final R^2 (%)	13.0*	15.8**	12.5

Note. $N = 189$. β1 = standardized beta upon entry of block into equation (thus controlling for previous and current blocks); β2 = standardized beta from full model (final beta controlling for all variables in the model).
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

third-person perception differentials were significant for comparisons of self to other Delaware students, self to youth from New York and Los Angeles, and self to the average person. In addition, separating out the perceptual differences by condition (violent vs. misogynic rap) revealed that both conditions induced a perceptual third-person effect (Table 1).

Hypothesis 2 stated that the size of third-person perceptions should increase as comparisons were made with referent groups more socially distant from

the perceiver. There was only limited support for this hypothesis (Table 1). The group we expected to be most socially distant, the average person, did not produce the greatest third-person perception. Instead, youth from New York and Los Angeles demonstrated the largest perceptual difference from self, significantly greater than the difference between self and other Delaware students and between self and the average person. Also contrary to Hypothesis 2, the size of the difference between self and other Delaware students was not significantly less than the difference between self and the average person.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a positive association between perceived knowledge of rap and third-person perceptions. Our results failed to support this hypothesis; in none of the three tests (Delaware students, New York/Los Angeles youth, or average person) was there a significant relationship between third-person perceptions and perceived knowledge of rap. The nonsignificant correlations ranged from −.03 (average person) to +.09 (Delaware students). Although inconsistent with our hypothesis, these findings are consistent with studies that have tested the relationship between *actual* knowledge and third-person perceptions.

Hypothesis 4: The Behavioral Component

Hypothesis 4 linked third-person perceptions with support for censorship of the presumably harmful content of rap music. To test this hypothesis, we used the diamond model in a multiple regression analysis (Whitt, 1983). The first block of the regression equation entered gender and conservatism as predictor variables, revealing that conservatives were more likely to support censorship of antisocial rap lyrics, but revealing no significant effect for gender.[8] Second, because previous research has indicated that "perceived harm" is an important predictor of willingness to support government regulation of media content (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), our measure of perceived social desirability of the "message" in the rap lyrics was entered into the regression equation next. The effect of social desirability on support for censorship was not significant. Our third control block included perceived knowledge of rap as well as our index of liking of rap. Both of these variables were significantly related to opposition to censorship at the zero-order level; however, both were reduced to nonsignificance after controls for the first two regression blocks.

The final block of the regression equation in Table 2 provided the test of Hypothesis 4. Here, both perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others (combined into two-item indices) and third-person perceptions (two-item difference scores) were entered into the equation simultaneously. The

evidence indicates that for each of the three comparison groups, third-person perceptions were significantly related to censorship attitudes, while self and other perceptions were in no case significantly related to support for censorship. The strongest relationship between third-person perceptions and support for censorship comes from the New York/Los Angeles comparison group, although all three comparison groups produced similar regression coefficients. Thus our data indicated strong support for Hypothesis 4 in each of three separate tests.[9]

Discussion

The results of this study provide solid support for both the perceptual and behavioral components of the third-person effect hypothesis. Consistent with past research, our respondents perceived others to be more influenced by negative media messages than themselves. In addition, this perception was strongly related to support for censorship, even after controlling for other important variables. The study provided less support for the knowledge and social distance corollaries of the perceptual component of the third-person effect hypothesis. However, our findings may shed some light on these areas of third-person effect research and lead to more fruitful research in the future.

The present study makes several contributions to the literature on third-person effects. Using a unique stimulus material (rap music), it replicated findings on the third-person perception. The supposed impact of antisocial rap lyrics is currently a hotly debated topic in news media, political discussions, and on the presidential campaign trail. Antisocial rap provides, then, a socially relevant context in which to study third-person effects.

The current political climate makes tests of the link between the perceptual and behavioral components of the hypothesis important. Politicians from both the Left and the Right have recently called for (at least) industry self-censorship of rap music in order to protect the masses. The present study adds to the small body of literature (required to add relevance to third-person perceptions) by assessing the relationship between these perceptions and support for censorship. In so doing, it investigates one plausible cause for the desire to censor media content. If it is the case (as research seems to indicate) that third-person perceptions are based on an overestimation of effects on others, the desire for censorship caused by third-person perceptions is built on a flawed foundation. Any censorship that results from misperceptions may in fact be unnecessary censorship.

The present study, like any single research effort, has its limitations. For instance, our test of the behavioral component actually used an attitudinal

measure as the dependent variable. That is, we were unable to measure censorship behaviors directly, and therefore we were forced to rely on self-report measures of support for censorship. This may not be a severe limitation, however, since public policy, such as restrictions on objectionable media content, is often based on public opinion.

Another limitation of this study is our inability to make strong causal inferences. Our cross-sectional data and limited number of controls restrict a conclusion of association between third-person perceptions and support for censorship. Future research might attempt to experimentally manipulate third-person perceptions in much the way the climate of opinion has been manipulated in studies of impersonal influence (Mutz, 1992). This would strengthen inferences about the direction of causality.

Finally, our homogeneous and gender-biased student sample may have provided greater third-person perceptions than those of the population. Davison (1983) suggests that third-person perceptions are greater among those who believe they are "experts" in a particular domain, and enrollment in a course in mass communication may have led our respondents to consider themselves experts in the domain of media effects. This sample issue is one common to many third-person effect studies (e.g., Cohen et al., 1988; Gunther, 1991; Mutz, 1989; Perloff, 1989).

These limitations, however, do not cast serious doubt on the major findings of the study, which help to move third-person effect research forward. Regarding our first hypothesis, our results indicated a consistent pattern of perceiving three groups of others (other Delaware students, New York and Los Angeles youth, and the average person) to be more influenced by both violent and antisocial rap lyrics than oneself. This finding adds to the substantial research demonstrating a perceptual third-person effect for negative media messages.

The social distance corollary (H2) predicted that the size of the perceptual bias will increase as the referent group becomes more socially distant from the perceiver. We operationalized social distance by assuming a priori that respondents would believe that other students at their university would be the most similar, people in their age group in New York and Los Angeles would be a little less similar, and people in the average person group would be the least similar. The social distance corollary held with the exception of the average person comparison group, which was perceived as similar to the other Delaware students group.

The most likely explanation of this finding is that the respondents considered the average person to be older than themselves, generally outside the target audience of rap music and hence less likely to be influenced. By contrast, the youth of large urban cities may be considered a prime target for

rap, and therefore more likely to be influenced by it. We suggest that future research take into account "target groups" in studies of the third-person effect.

The results of this study reveal that there may be two separate perceptual evaluations that regulate the size of the third-person perception—perceived social distance and perceived likelihood of exposure to the content (the target corollary). In this study, the effect of the target corollary seemed to be more powerful than the impact of social distance. However, it may also be that perceived social distance was not specified correctly in our a priori assumptions. This indicates the need for future research to directly measure perceived social distance to test these assumptions.

The results of this test of the social distance corollary point to the importance of considering the relationship of the third-person comparison group to the target market of the media content. Although the target market corollary seemed to outweigh the social distance corollary in our test, there are some questions about how important the target market consideration is with regard to judgments about effects on self. Perceived effects on self (more or less part of the target audience in this study) were seen as being less than the impact on the average person (somewhat outside the target audience). This may reflect the fact that the social distance corollary was not completely overrun by the target market corollary. It may also be that respondents do not consider target markets when they make judgments about themselves—instead, they see themselves as unlikely to be influenced by media content despite their membership in its target market. This explanation has some support in our data; while we do not have direct measures of exposure, the zero-order correlations between perceived effects on self and knowledge of rap ($r = .03$) and liking of rap ($r = .13$) are nonsignificant. Research examining the link between exposure and perceived effects on self, however, has generally found significant results (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990).

Clearly, the social distance corollary and the target corollary merit further research. Such research should also investigate an alternative interpretation of the target corollary. Conceivably, respondents could be passing judgment on the typical education level of members of the third-person comparison groups and making the assumption that less educated people are more susceptible to negative media influence (a possibility that is consistent with paternalistic notions that may account for linkages between third-person perceptions and the desire for censorship). Future research could measure perceived educational levels, perceived social distance (i.e., dissimilarity), and the perceived likelihood of exposure to the stimulus genre (e.g., rap music) of each of the comparison groups in order to investigate the various explanations for these results.

Our results did not support the knowledge corollary predicted by the third hypothesis. Although some research has indicated that perceived knowledge of a content domain leads to greater third-person perceptions (Lasorsa, 1989), our results indicated no significant effect. This finding is similar to those of Lasorsa (1989) and Price and Tewksbury (1994), who found that actual knowledge was not related to third-person effects. It is possible that respondents in our study had no incentive to exaggerate their knowledge of rap music (as is likely for Lasorsa's measure of perceived political knowledge), and therefore their perceptions in fact were an accurate representation of their actual knowledge. It is possible that the knowledge corollary may only hold in situations where perceived knowledge is an overestimate of actual knowledge.

Finally, our data provide strong support for the behavioral component of the third-person effect (H4), which states that perceiving others as more influenced by media content than oneself is related to support for taking actions to protect others. In several tests comparing the impact of the third-person perception with additive indices of perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others, the third-person perception was consistently a significant predictor while the additive index was in no case significant. The impact of third-person perceptions on support for censorship was strong despite controls for several correlates of censorship (gender, conservatism, social desirability of the content and knowledge of and liking of the content in question).

Findings of a strong relationship between third-person perceptions and support for censorship provide insight into the real-world impact of third-person perceptions. Whereas some might question the importance of a perceptual error, regardless of its consistency, few media researchers would dispute the importance of a perceptual bias that leads to support for censorship. By providing correlational evidence for the behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis, we have bared the "teeth" of the third-person effect.

It is possible that the effects of third-person perceptions go beyond support for censorship. Future third-person research should attempt to link third-person perceptions to more broad public opinion processes. For instance, are those who exhibit third-person perceptions more likely to participate in the public opinion formation and change processes (regarding censorship or otherwise) as radio talk show callers or protesters? Are those who hold third-person perceptions consistently more likely to hold strong attitudes on public issues, whatever the valence? Future third-person effect research may benefit most from links to more broad public opinion research and to psychological research on the concept of pluralistic ignorance.

Researchers from both social science and legal perspectives should further explore the impact of third-person perceptions on attitudes toward media

censorship. In a time when the political climate is replete with calls for censorship of not only rap lyrics but also other forms of media content, this research is all the more important.

Appendix

SOCIAL DESIRABILITY

On a scale from 0 to 10, circle the number that indicates how you rate the message in the lyrics in terms of its antisocial/prosocial content.

LIKING OF RAP

Please rank the following types of music in order of your preference: country (e.g., Garth Brooks, Clint Black, Mary Chapin Carpenter, etc.), classic rock (e.g., Led Zeppelin, Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, etc.), heavy metal (e.g., Metallica, AC/DC, Megadeath, etc.), rap/hip-hop (e.g., Public Enemy, Salt 'N' Peppa, Snoop Doggy Dog, etc.), alternative (e.g., Pearl Jam, Nine-Inch Nails, Nirvana, etc.), classical (e.g., Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, etc.), jazz (e.g., Miles Davis, Wynton Marsalis, Pat Metheny, etc.), reggae (e.g., Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, UB40, etc.), pop (e.g., Whitney Houston, Madonna, Phil Collins, etc.).

On a scale from 0 to 10, 0 being *not at all* and 10 being *a great deal*, circle the number that indicates how much you *like* each of the following types of music . . .

KNOWLEDGE OF RAP

On a scale from 0 to 10, 0 being *not at all* and 10 being *a great deal*, circle the number that indicates how *knowledgeable* you are about the artists and lyrics of each of the following types of music . . .

PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF RAP

(a) Overall, how much do you think *you* would learn from listening to songs with these types of lyrics? (b) Overall, how much would you say *your* attitudes would be influenced by listening to songs with these types of lyrics? (c) Overall, how much would you say that *your* behavior would be affected by listening to songs with these types of lyrics? (These same three questions were asked with other University of Delaware students, people your age in New York and Los Angeles, and the average person as the referent groups.)

SUPPORT FOR CENSORSHIP

(a) Songs with these types of lyrics should be banned from radio play during hours when children might be listening. (b) Songs with these types of lyrics should be banned from radio play during any time of the day. (c) Songs with these types of lyrics should be required to carry a parental advisory label to warn consumers about the possible negative effects of their content. (d) Songs with these types of lyrics should be banned

from MTV and other music video programs. (e) Songs with these types of lyrics should be self-censored by record companies. (f) Songs with these types of lyrics should be removed from music store shelves by local ordinance. (g) Sale of albums with songs containing these types of lyrics should be banned by federal law.

CONSERVATISM

The terms "liberal" and "conservative" may mean different things to people depending on the kind of issue one is considering. (a) In terms of economic issues, would you say you are very liberal, liberal, somewhat liberal, neutral, somewhat conservative, conservative, very conservative. (b) Now, thinking in terms of social issues, would you say you are very liberal, liberal, somewhat liberal, neutral, somewhat conservative, conservative, very conservative.

Notes

1. The motivational interpretation for the third-person effect has not gone unchallenged, however (see Perloff, 1993). The same can be said for attribution biases (e.g., Perloff & Fetzer, 1986) and pluralistic ignorance (e.g., Mullen, 1983) research paradigms in psychology, on which the third-person effect motivational explanation is based. We agree with Tetlock and Levi (1982), however, that the debate over motivational versus cognitive explanations is not fruitful until the theories have been developed enough to provide a critical test. It is most likely, we think (see also Perloff, 1993), that both motivational and cognitive biases occur simultaneously, as demonstrated by Sherman, Presson, and Chassin (1984) in a study of the causes of pluralistic ignorance. However, the motivational bias is stressed here because the bulk of evidence and theory in the third-person effect literature supports a motivational interpretation.

2. Although it may seem counterintuitive to predict that the causal force in the third-person effect is not absolute perceived effects on self or perceived effects on others but instead the difference between them, the third-person effect is not the only hypothesis that proposes that perceived differences between self and others may be the basis for holding political opinions or taking political actions. Relative deprivation theory has been applied to political science in order to explain why some people engage in protest activities (e.g., Barnes, Farah, & Heunks, 1979; Barnes & Kaase, 1979). This theory predicts that it is not absolute deprivation (in terms of one's life as a whole or standard of living) but the perceived deprivation by comparison to expectations or comparable reference groups that leads people to engage in political protest.

3. Three recent conference papers present somewhat contradictory evidence on this point, however. Lee and Yang (1996) found a significant relationship between third-person perceptions and support for censorship of sexually explicit television content in Korea, and Gunther and Hua (1996) found similar support for censorship among those evidencing greater third-person perception across a range of television content types in Singapore. However, Price et al. (1996) reported no significant relationship between third-person perceptions and support for censorship of a potentially offensive advertisement beyond the zero-order level. However, the relationship was at least in the predicted direction in this study.

4. A question at the end of the questionnaire asked respondents if they had ever heard of the third-person effect. Of the few who reported knowing about the third-person

effect, none was able to correctly answer an open-ended follow-up question about the nature of the hypothesis. For that reason, all subjects were retained for the analysis.

5. Question wordings are included in the appendix.

6. Several studies (Gunther, 1991, 1995; Price & Tewksbury, 1994; Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, & Rosenfeld, 1991) have found that there are no effects for the ordering of the self versus other questions. Price and Tewksbury (1994) also demonstrated that the observed third-person perceptual bias was not due to a contrast effect (i.e., making comparisons regardless of the order). Therefore, we made no attempt to randomize the order of the comparison groups.

7. Although the reliability of a difference score cannot be tested directly via Cronbach's alpha, Cohen and Cohen (1983) provide a formula to calculate it. The reliability of a difference score is calculated by subtracting the correlation between the two components of the difference score from the average of their reliabilities, then dividing by one minus the correlation between the component scores.

8. One of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript suggested that the relationship between political ideology and censorship might be nonlinear, such that not only strong conservatives but also strong liberals (e.g., feminists) might support censorship. However, analyses using power polynomials (see Cohen & Cohen, 1983) to test for a quadratic (inverted U) effect of conservatism on censorship attitudes revealed no significant deviation from linearity of this form in our data. Despite this, it should be noted that support for censorship is not necessarily limited to the conservative end of the ideological continuum and may be based instead on the group whose speech is going to be censored (see Sullivan, Pierson, & Marcus, 1983).

9. One of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript suggested that another analytical strategy, the Taylor model, would be a more stringent test of our hypothesis. Taylor (1973) argues that in order to test a hypothesis of effects of a difference score above and beyond its components' combined effects while avoiding linear dependence, the two components should be entered individually into the regression equation (unlike the diamond model, which combines them into an index). Then, instead of using the difference score as a predictor, the absolute size of the difference score and a pair of dummy variables (representing the possible directions of the difference score: positive, negative, and no difference) should be entered into the equation as an indirect representation of the difference score. The results of this analytical technique for the present data produced null findings for H4. In none of the three regressions did either the size of the difference between self and other or the direction of the difference between self and other significantly predict support for censorship. Examination of the final beta coefficients for self and other (separately) also showed null findings in two of the three tests. Only for the Delaware students comparison group did perceived impact on self (negatively) and others (positively) significantly predict support for censorship. We do not believe, however, that the results of this analytical strategy are meaningful. Although the Taylor model does avoid the linear dependence problem that prevents the test of the difference score and its two components in the same regression equation (because they are correlated at 1.0), even Taylor himself notes that severe multicollinearity remains a problem in this model (Taylor, 1973). Our data reveal evidence to support this assertion. In addition to indirect indications of multicollinearity, such as regression coefficients that are reversed in sign from their zero-order counterparts and large beta weights that do not attain statistical significance (e.g., $\beta = .20$), more direct tests, such as the multiple correlation between predictor variables (as large as .95 in the New York/Los Angeles regression model) and the variance inflation factor (see Neter, Kutner, Nachtsheim, & Wasserman, 1996) all indicated high levels of multicollinearity in our regression equations. It is for this reason that we have chosen to interpret the results of the diamond model only—we believe that the low levels of

multicollinearity in this model reveal the true relationships between the independent and dependent variables. However, we leave it to the reader to decide which strategy seems more appropriate.

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