



# The Third-Person Effect 40 Years After Davison Penned It: What We Know and Where We Should Traverse

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## ABSTRACT

Forty years ago in 1983, W. Phillips Davison coined the term “third-person effect,” generating a robust outpouring of research. This paper places the third-person effect in the contemporary age, one vastly different from the era in which Davison conceptualized perceptions of media effects. The article first describes the historical, sociological climate in which Davison operated, noting how the concept congealed with the intellectual zeitgeist of the 1980s. The paper then provides a critical synthesis of research on the self-other perceptual disparity and the behavioral corollary, focusing on early studies, moderators, mediators, and meta-analytic findings. After describing problems and complexities in third-person research, we ponder implications for the very different media and political psychological climate of 2023. We propose four specific research questions and four testable propositions, building on classic and contemporary theory and research.

The idea was intriguing, the possibilities portentous. W. Phillips Davison’s 1983 *Public Opinion Quarterly* article had a certain pizzazz. The third-person effect (TPE), with its novel nomenclature, seemed to capture all the distortions, fear and awe of media in one aphoristic phrase. I believe the media don’t affect me but am convinced it affects everyone else. I have no doubt that I am not affected but am equally convinced that they—the unwashed masses—are powerfully influenced. So simple and succinct—and suggestive of so many important implications. People rush to censor great books because they fear others will be swept up by the authors’ racy passages.

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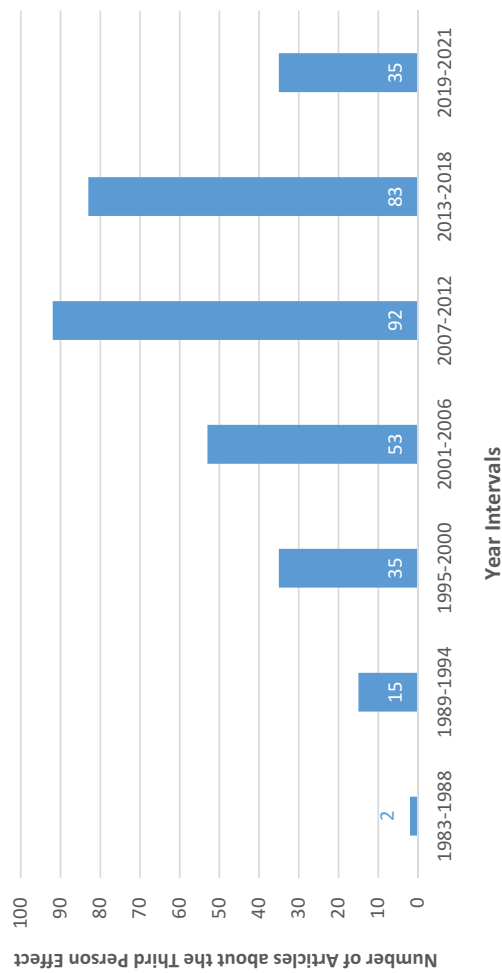
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They take to the streets to protest media messages they just know will harm others, but somehow won't penetrate their own more discerning minds. The idea seemed so foundational, so fundamentally correct that one had to stand back and admire the creator's clairvoyance.

The hypothesis caught on, intriguing researchers, propelling a fascinating study of its applications to libel in POQ in 1988, leading to a flurry of surveys in the 1990s, and spawning renewed research interest in the early 2000s to the tune of a total of 135 studies (Sun et al., 2008), so much research that by the time Bryant and Miron (2004) conducted a bibliometric study of the eight most popular theories in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the third-person effect placed in the top five concepts studied in all mass communication journals and was the most frequently cited theory in *Mass Communication and Society*, *Communication Research*, and *Media Psychology*. Dozens of studies probing its implications for elections, sports, the O.J. Simpson trial, pornography, and later Facebook were conducted, with a focus on moderators, mediators, and measurement issues. Research has continued apace over the years, notably persisting across different decades, constructs, and a host of proposed moderators and mediators. Documenting this, we conducted an exploratory analysis of the database Communication and Mass Media Complete, which has cataloged the greatest number of studies on this topic. As Figure 1 shows, the frequency of third-person articles in five-year periods during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as the first two years of the third decade, showed a comparatively upward, or at least relatively healthy, publication trend.

And now it is 2023, 40 years after Davison published his study, and where are we? Decades-long anniversaries provide an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the state of research in an area, with the wisdom afforded by age. What do we know about the third-person effect we did not know when Davison proposed the idea? What is the state of knowledge—its strengths and weaknesses? Is the third-person effect still worth studying in an era in which concepts that underpinned it, like *mass media*, are almost anachronistic? And if so, how should it be examined? This paper addresses these issues by providing a critical, integrative review of four decades of TPE studies. While not a data-based paper, the article draws heavily on data, notably meta-analyses, as we look backward and forward, contending that if the third-person effect is to survive and continue to generate worthwhile scholarship, we cannot pursue it with the same questions and strategies posed a generation ago, but instead must adapt conceptual and theoretical analyses to reflect a landscape substantially different than that which confronted Davison in 1983.

This paper discusses the third-person effect, past, present, and future, beginning with a historical, sociological review that places the concept in the context of the era in which it emerged. In the next portions of the



**Figure 1.** Trajectory of third- person effect studies.  
Number of articles about the third-person effect (categorized broadly as third-person effect, third-person perception, first-person effect, and first-person perception) from the database Communication and Mass Media Complete from 1983 to 2021.

paper, we review the knowledge base, discuss empirical challenges, and describe TPE's fraught implications for the contemporary era, concluding by articulating three broad research paths, four research questions, and four testable propositions to guide 21<sup>st</sup>-century third-person scholarship. Throughout this paper, we will use third-person perception interchangeably with third-person effect. Although one can argue there are nuanced differences between the terms, given that the TPE centrally involves subjective perceptions, the use of both terms allows for some helpful variability in word usage.

## Origins of the hypothesis

W. Phillips Davison, who was born in 1918 and died in 2012 (taking him through monumental media events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), was one of the leading members of the mid-century cadre of sociologists who studied public opinion and communication. A speech-making orator as a Princeton undergraduate and conscientious objector during World War II, he worked as an assistant to the noted sociologist Edward Shils in the Office of Strategic Services during World War II, concentrating on psychological warfare and development of war-time leaflets (Davison, 2006). Davison did his graduate work at Columbia, where he taught for two decades, focusing on intersections between public opinion and communication, viewing the audience as active, selective, and even demanding (Davison, 1964), insights he called on in the third-person piece. Davison wrote with a wry, detached, bemused perspective, aptly or ironically using the third person to describe himself, referring to himself as “the sociologist” in the 1983 article and “the social scientist in question” in a (Davison, 1996) reprise.

Concepts are frequently a product of the intellectual zeitgeist of an era, and the third-person effect article emerged during a period of feverish questioning of the empirical and ideological underpinnings of mass communication research. The same year POQ published Davison's article, the *Journal of Communication's* famous “Ferment in the Field” issue appeared, with its questioning the dominant focus on empirically derived mass communication effects, suggesting effects research simplified matters and missed the ideological underpinnings of media influences. While Davison didn't approach media ideologically, his article suggested a dissatisfaction with direct media effects, emphasizing that observers' perspectives on—or specifically, perceptions of—media effects were important, underscoring a focus on indirect, perception-mediated effects.

There was considerable questioning of dominant research paradigms during the 1980s. The same year Davison published his article, Chaffee and Hochheimer presented an ICA paper they published two years later

(Bineham, 1988; Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985). They argued that the fundamental assumption of the field—there had once been a hypodermic needle model of simple direct effects—never existed, suggesting that scholars' perspectives influenced the received history of the field, a point Wartella and Reeves (1985) embraced, in a complementary paper, noting that history is always written from a “particular vantage point” (p. 5). Although Chaffee and Hochheimer, and Wartella and Reeves, had broader sociology of knowledge concerns in mind, their perspectives jibed with Davison in one important way. They argued that scholars' outlook on media effects was influenced by the *meta-perspective* they had developed over the years. In a complementary fashion, Davison posited that the impact media exerted on receivers was itself influenced by the perceptions receivers brought to the message; their own perceptions of media effects could trigger unanticipated message effects.

By focusing on how beliefs about media effects could themselves influence subsequent action, Davison was in sync with a surge in scholarship during this period on the content and impact of lay beliefs and theories—how beliefs about reality could influence reality, as when mothers' beliefs about child-rearing could influence how they brought up their own children, or doctors' beliefs that the causes of addiction were pharmacological could cause them to favor drug treatment over psychotherapy (Furnham, 1988). By focusing on the meta-aspects of media effects, researchers were consciously reflecting on the old media effects paradigms, suggesting that in a variety of ways the received wisdom on media impact simplified the picture, missing complexities, historically, ideologically, and phenomenologically.

Davison's approach was distinct in an important respect. His concern was the disparity between observers' beliefs about media effects on themselves and others. It was the disparity, the gap, the perceptual gulf that was so interesting and exciting. To be sure, there was complementary research during this period that examined the disjuncture between personal and societal-level judgments of political issues. Tyler and Cook's (1984) impersonal impact hypothesis suggested that people could perceive larger influences on the societal than personal level (see also Brosius & Engel, 1996). Davison, perhaps because he came from a media sociology tradition, focused on the disjuncture between personal and mass, with a strong focus on perceived media effects, a distinctive contribution.

There was also this: Davison, trained as a sociologist, adopted a uniquely psychological approach, perhaps reflecting his eclectic orientation. The third-person effect pivots on cognitive comparisons between self and others, comparisons that could be traced theoretically to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which argued that people are driven to evaluate their opinions and abilities. The comparisons are rarely complementary, but intrinsically evaluative, with a focus on comparisons of self

*versus* others, in Andsager and White's (2007) felicitous phrase. The social psychological underpinnings of those comparisons and their effects would chart a research trajectory for scholars over a 40-year period.

### **Documenting the disparity**

Cohen et al. (1988) conducted the first research on the topic with an imaginative test of the hypothesis. They explored the third-person effect's implications for libel law, demonstrating that people perceived that defamatory communications exert a stronger effect on others than the self; they went on to suggest that jurors could overestimate the impact of biased news, in this way reaching distorted judgments about the impact of media on reputational harm. Other studies generated by Davison's hypothesis swiftly followed (Glynn & Ostman, 1988; Mutz, 1989; Perloff, 1989), as researchers seized the opportunity to study third-person effects of major media events of the era, spanning a 14-hour miniseries about a Soviet takeover of the U.S. called "Amerika" (Lasorsa, 1989), news of Clinton's Whitewater scandal (Price & Tewksbury, 1994), press coverage of the notorious O.J. Simpson trial (Salwen & Driscoll, 1997), and antisocial rap lyrics (McLeod et al., 1997), all of which should theoretically (and did empirically) produce third-person disparities.

### ***Moderators, mediators, and meta-analyses: What we know about self-other disparities***

Over the years, refinements occurred, as researchers derived new constructs from third-person studies, such as the first-person effect, the second-person effect (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002), presumed influence (a deliberate pivot from the disparity and toward an exclusive emphasis on the perceived impact on others; Gunther & Storey, 2003), and the social distance corollary. The first-person effect, inverting its more famous construct, is the tendency to assume that media exert a greater effect on the self (the first person) than others; it too has emerged in research, though not as robustly as its third-person cousin (Andsager & White, 2007). The second-person effect, presuming equal or mutual influences of messages on self and others, argues that the self is not driven to cognitively differentiate or distort message effects. Instead, its focus on shared perceptions of influence intriguingly suggests the possibility of common pursuits and collective action (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002).

Presumed influence elides the self-other dichotomy entirely, stipulating that individuals presume media exert a strong effect on others, and as a result change their attitudes accordingly. Presumed influence has enriched knowledge of perceived message effects, but its lack of attention to self-

other disparities has thwarted exploration of third-person differences, clouding the question of why presumed influence works. The social distance corollary posits that self-other disparities grow in magnitude with concomitant increases in perceived psychological distance between self and comparison others.

Over the years, a knowledge base about the third-person effect has emerged, documenting the ontological basis of the effect—i.e., it is a bona fide scientific effect that emerges, regardless of question-wording, question order, or experimental design (Brosius & Engel, 1996; David et al., 2004; Price & Tewksbury, 1996). With its legitimacy established, questions turned to why and when—explanations of self-other disparities, and conditions under which the effect is most likely, the venerable examination of mediators and moderators.

Reviews of the accumulating knowledge of the third-person effect identified a variety of rather different psychological and communicative mediating or explanatory processes, attesting to the depth of the effect, as well as its nagging ambiguity. Explanations include: (1) a universal human self-enhancing tendency to view the self in ways that make us look good or at least more positively than others, leading to minimization of effects on self and presumption of impact on others (e.g., Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996); (2) the psychodynamic projection process, whereby individuals, incapable of consciously acknowledging effects, project them onto others, a fascinating, but notoriously difficult explanation to verify; (3) actor-observer attributions of media effects on self to situational factors, minimizing dispositional effects, while presuming dispositional gullibility of others (Gunther, 1991); and (4) two meta-oriented explanations, an application of a media effects schema presuming a passive audience prototype, and an exposure-equals-effects lay theory that assumes greater media exposure brings forth stronger effects (Eveland et al., 1999), an interpretation that gave rise to the *target corollary*, whereby the group that is perceived as the target of a mediated message will be seen as more influenced (Meirick, 2005).

Two other novel explanations have been advanced, arguing, in varying degrees, that there is a logical, rational basis for third-person perceptions. Shen et al. (2018), departing from the common wisdom that third-person effects must be cognitive distortions, argued that some self-other disparities could be accurate, based on veridical perceptions of media effects, such as beliefs about greater influences of media on young children or heavy video game players' first-person admission of video game influences on the self (Schmierbach et al., 2011). When there is a normative fit between the audience and message—when the message could reasonably be expected to exert a larger effect on a target audience, as with male arousal and pornography (though this could be contested and might be controversial)

—third-person effects are not necessarily cognitive distortions, but are rooted in empirical facts (Reid et al., 2007).

This was the basis of a second, somewhat related explanation of third-person effects. Reid and his colleagues incorporated normative fit into their broader self-categorization approach, arguing that salience of social identity and ingroup/outgroup membership determine the extent of third- and first-person perceptions, with self-other disparities hinging on ingroup/outgroup identity, the individual's prototypical similarity to the hypothetical others, and the degree to which influence is expected of, or is normatively appropriate for, the ingroup or outgroup. Thus, third-person effects should be amplified when messages are judged to be the ones outgroup members expose themselves to or accept, while first-person effects should emerge for messages that ingroup members expose themselves to or attitudinally embrace (Cho & Boster, 2008; see Duck et al., 1995; Meirick, 2004; Reid & Hogg, 2005; for other studies bearing on group identification effects). The self-categorization view insightfully brought ingroup/outgroup membership into the milieu of research that implicitly involved comparisons of self with target groups of others, but remained agnostic on the important question of whether these comparisons were based on veridical perceptions or represented cognitive distortions.

In addition to examining explanatory mechanisms, studies conducted after the initial "Gee Whiz, there's a disparity here" earliest days of research explored a variety of moderating factors. These included message desirability or quality (Gunther & Mundy, 1993; White, 1997), ego-involvement (Price et al., 1998), perceived likelihood of exposure (Eveland et al., 1999; Peiser & Peter, 2000), as well as broader factors like education, age, knowledge, and social distance (Andsager & White, 2007; Connors, 2005; Meirick, 2004, 2005; Tsfati & Cohen, 2004). The findings have not yielded clear patterns, with Andsager and White's (2007) reporting mixed or equivocal evidence for moderating influences of message, source, and channel variables on third-person perceptions.

Meta-analytic studies have provided more clarity about self-other disparities, documenting the robustness of the third-person effect and pinpointing the particular moderators and mediators that are in play. Three meta-analyses found that the effect size, or magnitude of difference between estimated effects and the self, was robust:  $d = 0.50$  (Paul et al., 2000),  $d = 0.307$  (Sun et al., 2008), and  $d = 0.309$  (in the advertising context (Eisend, 2017), the latter two smaller because the authors explicitly considered issues pertaining to within-subject designs and statistical dependence between effect sizes that underestimated sampling error. Nonetheless, Sun and her colleagues, noting that the effect sizes were not significantly moderated by population type, research setting, use of single versus multiple items, or



between- vs. within-subjects design (David et al., 2004), concluded that “the evidence is clear that the self-other discrepancy in perceived message effect is a real and robust phenomenon that cannot be attributed to methodological artifact” (p. 294).

Sun et al. (2008) did find that several conceptual factors exerted moderating influences. Message desirability, vulnerability of the referent third persons, perceived likelihood of message exposure, and sociodemographic differences between self and hypothetical others (though not geographical distance) exerted moderating effects (see also product advertising vs. PSAs; Eisend, 2017). From a process perspective, their findings on message desirability support a self-enhancement view, while the perceived media exposure results are consistent with the cognitive interpretation that the presumed probability of exposure mediates the third-person effect. It is possible that there weren't enough studies looking at outgroups and normative fit to adequately test the self-categorization view.

### ***The behavioral corollary***

Does the third-person effect have behavioral consequences? In what might be called the behavioral corollary, Davison posited that perceiving media have adverse effects on others, though not the self, could lead to clarion calls for censorship. He didn't offer a strong theoretical logic, but other researchers have tried to provide conceptual underpinnings. Sun et al. (2008), noting that behavioral consequences can vary in terms of the nature of the agent, type of action, and target of the action, argued that attempts to rectify untoward effects of the self-other disparity include efforts to restrict perceptually harmful content, correct objectionable materials, or promote socially beneficial messages that offer alternatives to the content perceived to exert harmful influences (see also Gunther et al., 2008). A number of studies have found influences of third-person effects on behavioral measures (e.g. Jensen & Hurley, 2005; Lee & Tamborini, 2005; McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas et al., 1996; Rojas, 2010; though see Tsfaty & Cohen, 2005). There have been three meta-analyses on the behavioral corollary that revealed a small but significant association between the perceptual disparity and behavioral intention:  $r = .13$  (Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008),  $r = .15$  for support of censorship (Feng & Guo, 2012), and  $r = .14$  for support for regulation of product ads and  $r = .11$  for engagement with PSA ads (Eisend, 2017).

In sum, 40 years of research have done much to advance knowledge of a creative, eclectic proposition about perceived disparity of media effects. Researchers have stretched the conceptual bandwidth of the third-person effect, expanding its boundaries to include first-person effects, social distance, and a host of moderators and mediators that attest to the central

impact self-other comparisons play in judgments about media effects, and their subsequent impact on behavior. Far from being just an interesting idea with a little anecdotal support, as suggested by Davison in his 1983 article, there is now abundant evidence documenting third-person disparities, not only from meta-analyses, but from cross-cultural studies that (defying the expectation the effect would be extinguished in collectivist cultures with their decreased focus on individualistic self-comparisons) have found strong third-person effects in Asian, as well as other, nations (e.g., Willnat et al., 2002). And yet there is a frustrating lack of knowledge of the fundamental meaning of findings concerning moderators and mediators. Message desirability is fraught, with questions about what desirability means, its underlying attributes, and the extent to which its effect hinges on subjective definitions. Social distance has emerged as a reliable determinant of third-person effects, with Andsager and White's (2007) reporting that "others who are anchored to the self as a point of reference are perceived to be less influenced by persuasive messages than others who are not defined" (p. 92), a finding that complements Sun et al.'s meta-analytic conclusion that sociodemographic differences between self and hypothetical others moderate third-person effects. Yet social distance is a messy construct that encompasses perceived similarity, predispositions of socially distant others (Meirick, 2004), size of the hypothetical audience, the degree to which others are evaluated favorably as ingroup members, or disparaged as members of the outgroup, to say nothing of the fact that hypothetical others can be close to the self, but removed from the message topic, or distant from the self but close to the particular topic at hand (Tsfati & Cohen, 2004).

## Problems and challenges

Thus, even as meta-analytic studies have documented the strength of the perceptual effect, questions persist, highlighting concerns about the fundamental meaning of the third-person disparity. Three key problems have surfaced. A first issue is as fraught as it is basic: measurement. Not only can different measurement strategies yield different results, but even after four decades, dozens of studies, multiple meta-analyses and various reviews, there are still questions about the empirical meaning of the effect, chiefly, whether third-person effects reflect perceived disparity between media effects on others and the self, or are attributable to beliefs of media effects on others, the focus of presumed influence research, which ignored the perceptual disparity (Gunther & Storey, 2003).

The extant literature does not have an answer to these questions, primarily because there is a methodological issue: the perceptual disparity is a linear combination of perceived effects on self and on others. As

Schmierbach et al. (2008) noted, a particular measurement strategy can confound the relative difference between self-other measures with the absolute levels of the two variables (see also Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002). Moreover, when two respondents both perceive others are three times more influenced than the self, but the second starts at a higher baseline, perceiving both self and others as more affected than the first respondent, a subtraction measure would reveal a larger third-person effect for the second respondent (Schmierbach et al., 2008). However, this could be a function of this individual's higher absolute scores, artifactually suggesting the second respondent has a larger third-person effect than the first individual. Yet, on a phenomenological level, it remains an empirical question whether individuals engage in additive (i.e., absolute differences between referents) or multiplicative (i.e., proportional differences between referents) arithmetic activities when making comparative judgments in the domain of media effects.

Measurement issues also come to the fore when one considers the behavioral corollary. The observed correlations between the perceptual disparity and behavioral intention can be attributed to perceived effects on the self, perceived effects on others, and the perceptual disparity, which is a linear combination of the two. Given the measurement issues, the observed correlations cannot be interpreted at face value. Scholars have tried different statistical methods to address the issue of confounding (Chung & Moon, 2016; Sun et al., 2008). Evidence for the behavioral corollary, however, lies in the unique effect of perceptual disparity on behavioral intention above and beyond the two perceived effects measures (i.e., its two linear components). Scholars have suggested that perceived effects on others and/or perceived effects on self might be better predictors of behavioral intention than the perceptual disparity (e.g., Chung & Moon, 2016; see also Eisend, 2017; Gunther & Storey, 2003). Thus, the array of third-person effect findings involving moderators and the behavioral corollary can be artifacts of measurement strategy and study design, and failure to appreciate the role played by methodological artifacts can obfuscate the core meaning of the third-person effect.

The second core problem concerns the degree to which third-person disparities represent perceptual distortions or are logical beliefs about perceived effects on others. For years, as Tiedge et al. (1991) noted, the perceptual disparity was viewed as illogical, a bias blind spot (Pronin et al., 2002; Tiedge et al., 1991). But perhaps there are instances when third-person perceptions aren't so illogical and might not even represent a cognitive fallacy, as Shen et al. (2018) argued (see also Lyons, 2022 for an interesting study). In some cases, people may have a reasonable—and not biased—basis for believing that a target audience of others would be more influenced than the self, derived from reasonably accurate judgments about the effects of media on these

groups, given a normative fit between media content and the group in question, such as perceived effects of pornography on men's arousal and excitement (Lo & Wei, 2002; Reid et al., 2007), as well as first-person effects on video gamers (Schmierbach et al., 2011).

The third problem with third-person effect research is not new but has become more salient in the contemporary media era. Third-person research has consisted primarily of surveys, with some experiments, in which respondents are asked to consider the effects of media on themselves and hypothetical others, using vague third-person referents. Third-person effect studies that take place in university settings can run the risk of creating self-other disparities that don't occur as frequently or regularly in real-world contexts (Banning, 2001; Shen et al., 2015).

What's more, the very use of the word "effects," with its implicit acknowledgment that the self has been influenced, an admission inconsistent with individualistic Western norms (Lee & Tamborini, 2005), militates against people conceding they have been impacted by media. Very different responses might be obtained if different, more active linguistic forms were employed, such as asking people to describe how they felt after exposure to media, if they thought about social issues differently after viewing TV programs or entertaining podcasts, what they got out of streaming a particular YouTube video, and using words that encourage recognition of active media use, long a philosophical canon in uses and gratifications research (see Brosius & Engel, 1996). In other words, asking people to acknowledge effects on the self suggests the self is passive and even incapable of having the psychological wherewithal to ward off harmful influences. Who would want to acknowledge that? The problem is magnified by the fact that the questions are about media effects in general, a question that encourages a scripted response, rather than a thoughtful consideration of the impact (or, more actively phrased, of the gratifications received).

### ***Do third-person effects still exist, and if so, how?***

Forty years after Davison's penetrating article, the media that dominated his era are a shadow of what they were, complemented and supplanted by a host of social media networks that involve people in more dynamic, ubiquitous ways. Today's media are no longer technological devices experienced as outside the self, but personalized, portable, transportable, wearable, their content algorithmically tailored to individual users who themselves generate and share content that reaches other like-minded individuals; we are, it seems, "endlessly connected" to highly agentic mobile media (Karsay & Vandenbosch, 2021, p. 779). Video games are far from electronic, impersonal objects that cultivate effects, but objects deeply cathected to the self, transporting players to a zone of deeply-satisfying

engagement that can bring about a state of flow and, during the pandemic, a vital sense of connectivity. When people live on media or are psychologically inseparable from media—figuratively, and via immersive connections in the metaverse, literally—the classic third-person focus on media effects on self versus others provides an awkward, mechanistic fit with contemporary mediated experiences.

If Facebook is, to some degree, an interpersonal medium, does it make sense to talk about third-person media effects (Banning, 2008)? Would we think about a wide-ranging, intimate interpersonal conversation in terms of effects on the self? Do teenage girls, who make upward peer comparisons on Instagram and Facebook and regularly monitor their appearance (Manago et al., 2015), really think in terms of Instagram effects, or in more dynamic self-referential ways, magnified by the vast diffusion of repetitive messages about the equating of beauty with thinness? Would young people engaging in rapid, multi-tasked, instantaneous sharing and reception of TikTok messages from friends and strangers really think of TikTok in terms of the strained, linear, Joseph Klapper-derived grammar of media effects? One could go so far as to argue that the third-person effect is an unwieldy, out-of-date concept with little relevance to today's era, one that shed light on the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century era of strong media effects, but like other constructs, is limited to the social and technological contours of a particular historical time (Gergen, 1973).

And yet, there continue to be widespread concerns about media effects, amid pervasive perceptions of deleterious influences of Fox News's anti-vaccination claims, critical race theory coursework, presumed liberal news bias, fake news, social media disinformation, and risqué body image content on Instagram, as the Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen argued (Perrigo, 2021). Internationally, authoritarian governments silence dissenting Twitter posts, fearing they will undermine the regime, as occurs regularly in China (Xiao & Mozur, 2022).

These contemporary applications suggest that the third-person effect may be of continuing scholarly relevance, perhaps capturing a fundamental truth about the intersection of the human mind with all manners of media. And indeed, there is evidence of third-person effects of Facebook, with respondents perceiving that others are more influenced than themselves by Facebook, its news posts, fake news, and digital disinformation about Covid (Buturoiu et al., 2017; Corbu et al., 2020; Lev-On, 2017; Liu & Huang, 2020; Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Yang & Tian, 2021). First-person effects of Facebook use and personally relevant stories have also emerged (Schweisberger et al., 2014; Tsay-Vogel, 2016).

The world has changed a lot since Davison's POQ article appeared 40 years ago, and third-person research cannot continue to focus on media in the same ways it did 40 or even 20 years ago. New directions are needed. We submit below three new paths, four research questions and four testable

propositions, the latter reflecting greater theoretical or empirical certainty about hypothesized effects.

### *Meld measurement and study design*

As suggested earlier, the standard questions tapping self-other disparities tend to access prototypes about media effects, while failing to invite consideration of first-person effects. This is particularly true when probing perceptions about social media. As Reeves et al.'s (2020) research suggests, people's use of Facebook can mean different things to different people. For one person, an hour of Facebook use could involve reading news stories, for another sharing social posts with friends, and for another watching pornography or surreptitiously tracking the activities of former spouses or boyfriend/girlfriends. Asking about the effects of Facebook as a medium will lead to artificial findings that miss the differentiated, context-bound, interactive uses of Facebook and other social media.

It is thus imperative that future studies of third-person effects contextualize questions, make clear the content or affordance that the researcher wants to probe, and use items that allow for acknowledgment of first-person perceptions related to positive effects, such as finding social companionship on Instagram, as well as negative effects, like feeling down on oneself when reading about another's obnoxiously stated accomplishment. When probing media that engage people in more interactive, deeply personal ways, researchers should replace or supplement the term "effect" with more active, experiential words that don't reflect a subject-object dichotomy but embrace the relational, interactive experiences people have with media today. For example, respondents could be asked to describe what they get from closely following social media influencers like Emma Chamberlain, why they spend a lot of time tracking her videos, or, on a much different topic, the nature of emotions they experience after watching scenes of Russian atrocities in Ukraine, importing the more active terminology and approach of research on uses and gratifications and technological affordances.

It is also important to focus on another important aspect of measurement—correspondence in the measurement of variables—to amplify knowledge of the behavioral corollary. Measurement correspondence refers to the level of agreement between the two sets of measures in terms of four entities: target, action, context, and time, (TACT, Ajzen & Fishbein, 1972; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Kim & Hunter, 1993). These four elements can help probe and specify the content and context domains of perceived media effects in the digital age. In particular, the TACT framework can help increase the extent to which third-person effect perceptions predict behavior (e.g., Sun, 2013). In other words, the focal behavioral measure must have validity in allying itself with the perceptual variable. Robust

associations between the perceptual disparity and behavioral outcomes can only emerge if there is correspondence between the perceptual and behavioral measures, in terms of target, action, context, and time, in accord with what Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) have extensively documented.

Thus, a measure of perceptions of TikTok effects among teenagers would have low correspondence if the measures only ask about influence in general, but would have higher correspondence if the measures ask about whether teenagers plan to share and/or act upon the TikTok posts. Or to take another example, a general item—perceptions of the impact of Fox News (akin to Ajzen and Fishbein’s attitude toward the object)—should have been less likely to predict liberals sharing angry posts about Tucker Carlson’s controversial documentary, “Patriot Purge,” about the January 6, 2021 insurrection, when it aired in November 2021 than a specific, highly correspondent item tapping perceptions of the impact that Tucker Carlson’s January 6-focused programming exerted on right-wing viewers’ attitudes toward January 6. This suggests these research questions.

RQ1: What is the impact of measurement correspondence on the magnitude of the perceptual disparity?

RQ2: What is the impact of measurement correspondence between effect estimates and behavioral outcomes on the behavioral corollary?

From a measurement perspective, researchers should be attuned to nuanced effects of different statistical strategies for testing third-person perceptions, building in methods that assess media effects on both self and others, such as the diamond model, to help clarify the meaningfulness of the subtractive score (Schmierbach et al., 2008). The diamond model (Hope, 1975) permits a clear estimation of the different components of the perceptual disparity (perceived effect on others, perceived effects on the self, and the absolute value of the disparity) to help reduce confounding of TPE variables.

Given the nature of correlational and observational data in TPE studies, establishing causality is challenging. The graphical causal model approach (Glymour & Greenland, 2008; Rohrer, 2018), and directed acyclic graph (DAG) analysis, provide a powerful, visual tool for mapping causal pathways that illuminate complex effects of variables. According to this approach, the causal link between perceptual disparity and behavioral outcomes depends crucially on identifying and measuring other variables that can be potentially relevant to the causal process and specifying statistical control (or non-control). In addition to the duo of perceptual disparity and behavioral outcomes, potential confounders, colliders (variables predicted by two or more factors), and mediators need to be present and modeled simultaneously and correctly. Such variables can include perceived effects on self, perceived effects on target



others, and predictors of effects estimates, such as media effects schema variables that influence individuals separately or jointly (Shen et al., 2018). The DAG approach can be helpful in empirically mapping pathways of causal effects from perceptions to behavior.

The DAG model presents a conceptual framework to think about and investigate the (implied) causal relationship between the perceptual disparity and behavioral outcomes. It is not an actual empirical model based on data. Based on our analysis, the extant literature has not explicitly analyzed or established causality as clearly as it should. There have been efforts to better ascertain the correlation between perceptions and behavior by adjusting for potential confounding and multicollinearity issues (Chung & Moon, 2016; Sun et al., 2008), but such efforts fell short of causal analysis. The DAG model helps us to analyze and potentially establish causality, specifically to determine whether perceived effects on self, perceived influences on others, or the disparity exerts a causal impact on behavioral variables. Empirical tests then should be conducted via path analysis or structural equation modeling.

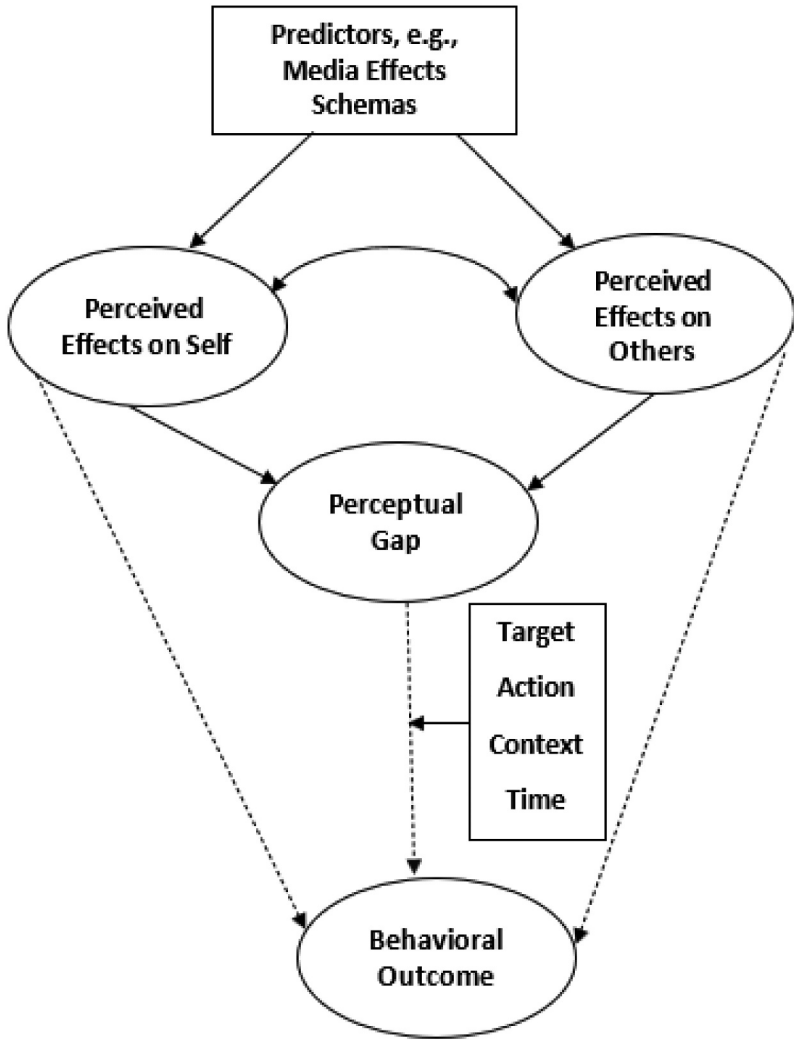
Figure 2 presents the proposed DAG framework, which provides guidance in assessing the robustness of causal inference for the behavioral corollary. It also includes, for predictive utility, the four TACT components (target, action, context, and time) discussed earlier. Establishing a causal link between perceptual disparity and behavioral outcome requires attention to three specific factors. First, the perceptual disparity is a function of perceived effects on self and/or on others, depending on various biases involved in comparative social judgments. Second, the two perceived effects variables, on self and on others, can be confounders (i.e., potential spuriousness due to a common cause of the perceptual disparity and behavioral outcome). Third, perceptual disparity has to be a mediator between perceived effects on self and the behavioral outcome, and/or between perceived effects on others and the behavioral outcome (i.e., the path from perceptual disparity to the behavioral outcome has to be significant and robust despite the presence/absence of the paths from perceived effects on self and others). The questions about parceling out other factors and establishing causation require careful research attention. Hence, we propose a third research question that would be empirically addressed through new empirical studies:

RQ3: Is the relationship between perceptual disparity and behavioral outcome (i.e., the behavioral corollary) causal in nature?

### ***Differentiate distorted from accurate perceptions***

Following Shen et al. (2018), it would be useful to determine the degree to which contemporary third-person effects are based on accurate perceptions or are, instead, the distorted cognitive fallacies Davison and other researchers emphasized. For example, it is quite possible that individuals are correct that Facebook





**Figure 2.** Proposed design and analysis strategy for the behavioral corollary. Darkened arrows from components of the third-person effect denote possible causal paths that could be tested through the DAG approach, more convincingly establishing causation from perceptions to behavior than has been achieved in the past. The line from the perceptual gap to the behavioral outcome focuses not on causation, but on gaining more measurement precision by establishing closer correspondence between the perceptual and behavioral measures through tapping into the four correspondence attributes derived from Fishbein and Ajzen's work.

misinformation has small effects on them, as when hateful, false rumors posted on Facebook led extremist Buddhists far removed from these observers to set fire to Muslim businesses, burning one man to death in March 2018 (Taub & Fisher, 2018). But if individuals perceive that misinformation of this kind exerts a comparatively large impact on others in general or the average person, this is a distortion, because, as decades of political communication research has documented, such effects are undoubtedly limited to people who had high exposure to the posts (in this case, extremist Buddhists) and harbored strong ethnic prejudices to begin with. Research needs to sort out these issues, examining when self-other disparities constitute a third-person perceptual distortion and when they constitute more reasonable estimates of social and political reality, and the processes underlying these judgments. This requires sensitive measures of accuracy, overestimation, and underestimation of effects.

Determining whether perceptions of differential media effects are accurate can be complex. The key lies in the detection of undistorted, rather than biased, perceptions of differential media effects, and whether the researchers have more or less objective information on the media effects on a particular group when perceivers make comparative judgments of media effects. For example, in the case of perceptions of media messages promoting Covid-19 vaccines, when the target referent (i.e., others) is the general public that includes both vaccine-inclined and vaccine-resistant individuals, the observed perceptual disparity might not be biased if it includes beliefs about strong anti-vaxxing individuals' resistance to persuasion. The influence of vaccine-promoting messages would have little or zero influence on individuals who are openly and strongly opposed to vaccines, as in the case of Aaron Rodgers and Novak Djokovic.

Assuming the presumed influence is socially desirable (i.e., a first-person perception scenario), let P1 be the perceived effects on self, P2 the perceived effects on general "others," and P3 the perceived effects on "anti-vaxxers." Given that P3 would be known (i.e., close to zero), the difference between "others" and "anti-vaxxers" (i.e.,  $P2 - P3$ ) would be approximate to an accurate estimate of disparity in perceived effects. Therefore, the distorted perceived disparity should be the gap between self and "others" adjusted with the accurate perception:  $(P1 - P2) - (P2 - P3)$ . In the case of third-person perception with perceived undesirable anti-vaccine messages, the same logic applies, but in the opposite direction: The biased perceptual disparity would be  $(P2 - P1) - (P3 - P2)$ . That is, when the media effects on a particular (sub) group are empirically observable or known, that information can be applied to partition accurate and distorted disparities in media effects perceptions.

Similar strategies can be applied in the context of computer games, comparing gamers and non-gamers, and, in the case of pornography, focusing on men and women, taking into account different normative expectations for males and females (Reid et al., 2007). Individuals might

project their “true” reactions onto individuals who are similar to themselves in the particular domain under investigation, while offering inaccurate, though not necessarily biased, estimates in the cases of people different or distant from the self. When non-self-report, objective information on different referents’ media consumption, engagement, and gratification is available, it can be used to partition accurate and distorted perceptions statistically (cf. Shen et al., 2018). The magnitude and/or the direction of the perceptual disparity is inevitably going to shift when such partitioning is performed. In a similar fashion, studies of the contemporary problem of effects of, and susceptibility to, fake news (Lyons, 2022) could benefit from separating out perceived bias from accuracy. Thus, it is imperative that we ask,

RQ4: Is the perceptual disparity robust when accurate perceptions of media effects differentials are partitioned?

### ***Bring third-person effect research into the polarized age***

Over the four decades of third-person effect research on perceptions of political media impact on self and others, the U.S. has become more polarized on national issues, and partisan schisms have accentuated (Fishkin et al., 2021). At the same time, there has been a growth in partisan media that attract like-minded partisans, setting in motion selective exposure, confirmation biases, and the hostile media effect, or partisans’ belief that media coverage is biased against their side and in favor of their antagonists (Perloff, 2015). From a third-person theoretical perspective, this suggests that the self-categorization perspective (Reid & Hogg, 2005), ingroup/outgroup membership (Duck et al., 1995; Meirick, 2004), and hostile media effects, fueled by involvement, should be more salient than in previous times, and useful frameworks for research.

For example, liberal in-group members should perceive that they are immune from conservative media effects, while presuming that the public is strongly affected by conservative platforms like Fox and Breitbart. In a similar fashion, conservative ingroup members should exempt the self from influence by liberal media, while presuming the public is strongly influenced by liberal platforms.

Shen’s et al. (2018) distinction between distorted and accurate perceptions suggests that in group members might be correct that they are impervious to influence, but then again, they might be susceptible to boomerang effects and actually feel more strongly that the outgroup’s message is hostile to their side, in line with Lord et al.’s (1979) famous findings that partisans felt more intensely that they were correct after reading a message on an ego-involving topic. Thus, displaying a third-person effect, liberals might perceive that Fox News exerts no impact on

their liberal attitudes (and a large effect on everyone else). But if we were to put their perception to the test and probed—in a non-reactive fashion—their actual reactions to viewing Fox News, we might find that they underestimated the effect of the program on themselves, not recognizing how it pushed them to feel more strongly that Fox was biased against their side than they imagined it would.

To explore this possibility, researchers would need to measure perceived effects, not with an item that assessed perceived absolute value of effects, but one that looked at directionality, i.e., with one pole stating that exposure to Fox leads viewers to become more liberal, and the other pole that it leads them to be more conservative. Given the knowledge base in this area, we put forth this research proposition, focusing on first-person effects.

Proposition 1: Partisan ingroup members will underestimate the degree to which exposure to outgroup media causes them to feel more positively toward the ingroup and more negatively toward the outgroup.

Complicating matters, conservative individuals have a stronger tendency toward perceptions of bias (Baron & Jost, 2019), are more likely to perceive the media as hostile (e.g., Oh et al., 2011), and are more susceptible to misperceptions (e.g., Garrett & Bond, 2021). Because false information spreads more quickly and deeply through conservative online networks, reinforcing conservatives' preference for intuitive, sometimes conspiratorial, thinking, conservatives can harbor stronger hostile media biases than liberals (Baron & Jost, 2019). This suggests the following testable proposition:

Proposition 2: In a polarized media landscape, self-other disparities of media effects will be larger for conservatives than liberals.

The polarized political communication environment also has interesting implications for research on the behavioral corollary. Media coverage, with its focus on polarization and partisan differences, should prime contrasts or differences between the ingroup and the outgroup, magnifying third-person differences (Shen et al., 2015). It also seems likely that when members of a partisan ingroup (e.g., right-wing conservatives and left-wing liberals) harbor a distorted perception of the effects of outgroup political platforms on the public, they may feel angry that the media will, in their view, push the public away from their perspective and toward the “dangerous” viewpoint of the outgroup. If partisans on both sides perceive that media are exerting strong, hostile effects on others, accentuating self-other disparities, they may, à la Lord et al. (1979), feel more entrenched in their own viewpoint, increasingly of the opinion that only they have the correct facts, more convinced the other side is wrong, perceiving their antagonists not as a legitimate adversary, but an enemy representing a threat to democracy.

Thus, third-person perceptions can intensify the fraying of democratic norms that have occurred in recent years, highlighting a point that Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) articulated:

When societies divide into partisan camps with profoundly different world-views, and when those differences are viewed as existential and irreconcilable, political rivalry can devolve into partisan hatred. ... If we believe our opponents are dangerous, should we not use any means necessary to stop them? (p. 6)

While third-person perceptions are not the only cause of these beliefs, they can contribute to increased polarization, as each side views the other as a dangerous source imparting misinformation to vulnerable others. Polarization, emotional reactions like anger (Weeks et al., 2019), and anti-democratic activities represent new pathways for research, new dependent variables that third-person perceptions might influence, moderated by partisanship and mediated by contrast effects, hostile media perceptions, and ingroup/outgroup categorization biases. This generates the following research proposition:

Proposition 3: In a politically polarized media landscape, third-person effects of partisan media content will predict antipathy toward the outgroup and more cynicism about democracy.

The ideological asymmetry observed by Baron and Jost, indicating that conservatives may be more prone to partisan biases than liberals suggests an interesting wrinkle on this research proposition.

Proposition 4: In a polarized media landscape, the behavioral corollary will be more robust for political conservatives than for liberals, such that third-person effects will exert a stronger impact on anti-democratic behavioral intentions for conservatives than for liberals.

Third-person influences on censorship, a time-honored factor in the behavioral component literature, also deserve attention. But once again, the new and contemporary emphasis should be on the ways partisanship influences ingroup members' attitudes and behaviors toward censoring materials antithetical to the group. Thus, when right-wing political leaders introduce bills to ban critical race theory from school curricula (Schuessler, 2021), a Republican activist leads a well-publicized effort to forbid students from reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Lerer & Epstein, 2021), liberal *New York Times* reporters oppose the publication of a Republican senator's op-ed that argued military troops should be sent in to restore order in the wake of 2020 George Floyd protests, or transgender activists oppose publication of a thoughtful, if controversial, book, on sex reassignment surgery (Giffith, 2021), third-person processes are likely at work, intersecting with

partisan biases, perhaps accentuated by paternalism or intrinsic dislike of the content in question.

Censorship is far from the only behavioral component that can be triggered by third-person effects. A host of new consequences are afoot, ones that weren't conceivable 40 or even 30 years ago. Third-person effects can lead to beliefs about the influences of algorithms, bots, and algorithmic amplifications on antisocial behavior (McCabe, 2021), suggesting there can be third-person perceptions about artificial intelligence and machine learning. Individuals (frequently partisans perceiving online media through predictable biased blind spots), who succumb to third-person effects, might, as a result, come to favor stronger policing of the spread of misinformation or even eliminating Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which protects social media companies from legal liability from users' posts (Complicating matters, on a normative level, given rampant misinformation and criticisms of Facebook's lax self-policing, such censorship has more normative support than it did 40 years ago). These issues have rich implications for contemporary third-person studies, suggesting a host of research pathways.

## Conclusions

Forty years of research has, at the very least, shown that the third-person effect is a unique concept in mass communication research. It captures the power that perceptions play in the mediated communication process, highlights the ways that entrenched psychological biases can distort communication, and ties perceptions to effects, in these ways pointing to intriguing, if troubling, aspects of the human condition, political psychology, and our media age. From a conceptual perspective, the third-person effect is an original concept, but one lacking in the kind of theoretical breadth that suggests a wealth of specific hypotheses, as is the case with the ELM or cognitive dissonance. Nonetheless, it has generated a fascinating literature, offering up evidence and insights that would not have been advanced in the absence of Davison's imaginative intuiting of the power perceptions play in communication.

Although third-person effects are not as simple and generic as they were in 1983, they are still relevant, even as the media map and political psychology of the public have changed dramatically. But these changes require adaptations in how scholars think about studying these issues. After four decades, multiple meta-analyses and conceptual reviews later, TPE research has, in a way, stalled. Whereas a deluge of publications keep widening its application to emerging message contexts in the polarized digital media landscape (e.g., Jang & Kim, 2018), little progress has been made to explain TPE in either theoretical or empirical terms. The identified predictors and moderators of the perceptual disparity seem sporadic and sometimes random, instead of

systematic and coherent. Given that most evidence of the behavioral corollary comes from cross-sectional surveys rather than experimental studies, causal inferences are difficult to achieve. As a result, the TPE framework has served more as a theoretical drape placed on a message context to make sense of an observed phenomenon (the perceptual disparity) and observed correlations (the behavioral corollary). However, media psychology theory consisting of predictions, with rich evidence of a causal nature, remains elusive. We hereby echo earlier calls for more rigorous theoretical development and research directed toward a normative theory of TPE (e.g., Perloff, 2009; Shen et al., 2018; Sun, 2013). New concepts, wrinkles, and research directions on the nature of self-other disparities raise fascinating issues, some with important implications for democracy, in this age of fragmented media, partisan perceptions, and continued gulfs between *me* and *them*.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

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