

## Third-Person Perception and Racism

JOHN R. CHAPIN  
Penn State University

The study documents third-person perception regarding media depictions of other races and cultures. Results from a small-scale survey of adolescents indicate that third-person perception provides a useful framework to understand how adolescents perceive media depictions of racial and ethnic groups. The study also draws from the health psychology literature, finding optimistic bias and personal experience, both predicting third-person perception.

Medical science has yet to isolate the racism gene; racism is learned. Even the earliest media studies, the landmark Payne Fund Studies, argued that media depictions had the ability to shape the worldview of young audience members. This was especially true when audience members were exposed to people of different races and cultural backgrounds. Media screens still depict unfamiliar "others," and audiences continue to learn from such depictions.

Understanding how people perceive the often skewed, stereotyped and outright racist depictions of other races may shed some light on contemporary racism. Third-person perception (Davison, 1983) provides a useful framework for such understanding. The third-person perception hypothesis posits that people believe the media's greatest influence is not on themselves (the first person), or people like them (the second person), but on distant "others" (the third person). The behavioral hypothesis of the third-person perception goes on to predict that people act on their misperceptions (Perloff, 1999). While reviews of the literature (Duck, Hogg & Terry, 2000; Perloff, 1999) indicate that third-person perception is well documented, less is known about what contributes to the misperception and how much such perceptions guide behaviors. For instance, what do people learn from media depictions of unfamiliar races and cultures? If they believe they are less prone to be affected by such depictions, are they more likely to adopt stereotypes as fact? The current study applies the third-person perception framework to racism.

---

John R. Chapin: [jrc11@psu.edu](mailto:jrc11@psu.edu)  
Date submitted: 2007-06-18

Copyright © 2008 (John R. Chapin). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

### ***Purposes of the Study***

First, the study seeks to document third-person perception regarding media depictions of other races and cultures. The study also explores the impact of knowledge, personal experience and demographics on third-person perception. Finally, the study bridges the communication-based literature to psychology, by further exploring the relationship between third-person perception and optimistic bias.

### ***Third-Person Perception***

Third-person perception has been documented in a variety of contexts, including advertisements (Banning, 2001; Chapin, 2001), public service announcements (Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996; Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002), pornography (Lo & Paddun, 2001; Wu & Ku, 2001) and entertainment programming (Chapin, 2002; Peiser & Peter, 2000). While racism has yet to be the focus of a published third-person perception study, the entertainment programming and pornography contexts are close enough to provide some insights to the benefits of such an investigation.

Hypothesis 1: Adolescents believe they are less influenced than others by media depictions of people of different racial or cultural backgrounds (third-person perception).

Hypothesis 2: Third-person perception will increase as income and age increase.

Hypothesis 3: Third-person perception will increase as perceived knowledge of racism increases.

### ***Optimistic Bias***

In response to a criticism in the first major review of the literature, that third-person perception was an interesting hypothesis in need of a theory (Perloff, 1989), numerous attempts have been made to identify underlying mechanisms through linkages to other theories. The most promising of these is optimistic bias (Weinstein, 1980). Like third-person perception, optimistic bias is a perceptual bias. Drawing from the health psychology literature, optimistic bias predicts that people believe they are less likely than others to suffer the negative consequences of their behaviors. Optimistic bias has been shown to predict actual risk behaviors, including smoking (Arnett, 2000; Chapin, 2001) and risky sex (Chapin, 2001; van de Ven, Rawstorne, Nakamura, Crawford, Kippax, 2002). Linking the literatures facilitates a logical leap as well. It is not simply that third-person perception regarding skewed or prejudiced depictions of other races may discourage adolescents from recognizing racism in the real world; through optimistic bias, the same adolescents may begin to act on their skewed knowledge-base, becoming active racists themselves.

Hypothesis 4: Third-person perception will increase as optimistic bias increases.

Hypothesis 5: Third-person perception will decrease as personal experience with racism increases.

### ***Methods***

To test the hypotheses, a small-scale survey was administered to a sample of middle school and high school students ages 14 to 18 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (N = 200). Students were gathered for an in-school presentation about racism. The presentation included types of racism and focused on peaceful coexistence in a diverse environment. Surveys were completed following the presentations in conjunction with participant evaluations. Participants were 69.8% Caucasian, 25.4% African-American, 2.1% Asian, 1.1% Latino, and 70% female. Household income ranged from \$10,000 (2.1%) to more than \$100,000 (16.5%), with the mean falling between \$45,000 and \$65,000.

### ***Third-Person Perception***

Third-person perception was measured with a standard instrument used throughout the literature. Participants responded to two items: "How much do you think YOUR perceptions of people of different cultural/ethnic groups are shaped by the media?" "How much do you think OTHERS' (people your age in the U.S.) perceptions of people of different cultural/ethnic groups are shaped by the media?" Assessments were measured on a 7-point scale (0 = not at all; 6 = very much). Comparative assessments of the media's influence is calculated by subtracting the "others" rating from the "self" rating. Third-person perception is exhibited by a negative mean, indicating participants believe others are more influenced than they are by the media.

### ***Knowledge***

Based on knowledge measures used throughout the literature, participants were instructed: "Rate your current knowledge level of race relations" on 7-point scale (0 = below average; 6 = expert). Because perceived expertise predicts third-person perception, participants' actual knowledge levels were not relevant to the study.

### ***Demographics***

Age, gender and household income levels were self-reported.

### ***Experience***

Participants were instructed: "Rate your personal experience with racial hatred and/or discrimination" on a 7-point scale. (0 = None; 2 = I have seen it; 6 = It has happened to me).

### **Optimistic Bias**

Optimistic Bias was measured with a standard instrument designed by Weinstein (1987). The measure ordinarily asks participants to estimate their relative risk of a particular harm (AIDS, auto accident, diabetes, etc.) as compared with a group of peers. In this case, the procedure asked participants to compare their relative likelihood of discriminating against others: "Compared to other people your age in the USA, how likely is it that YOU will discriminate against someone else in the next year?" Comparative assessment was measured on a 7-point scale (-3 = Much less likely; +3 = Much more likely). A mean of zero would indicate no bias, either optimistic or pessimistic, on the group level. Optimistic bias is indicated by a negative mean.

### **Findings**

H1 predicted third-person perception. A paired sample t-test was used to test the hypothesis. As predicted, participants believed others' perceptions of people of different cultural/ethnic groups ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ) were more shaped by the media than were their own perceptions ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.9$ ),  $t(189) = -6.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . H1 was supported.

Standard linear regression was used to identify the best predictors of third-person perception. Results are summarized in Table 1. Analysis of residual plots indicates that assumptions regarding normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were met.

H2 predicted relationships between third-person perception and demographics. Given that most participants were high school students, it is not surprising that third-person perception failed to increase with age. As predicted, however, third-person perception did increase with income. As indicated in Table 1, income was the strongest predictor of third-person perception. H2 was supported for income, but not for age. This finding is consistent with the limited literature.

**Table 1**

Summary of linear regression analysis for variables predicting third-person perception (TPP).

Third-Person Perception			
Adj $r^2 = .11$			
N = 190			
<b>Predictor</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SEB</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>
Income	.30	.13	.23**
Optimistic Bias	.26	.11	.23**
Experience	-.14	.09	-.16

\*\* $p < .01$

H3 predicted a relationship between third-person perception and knowledge about racism. As a group, participants rated themselves as more knowledgeable than average ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ). Less than 3% rated themselves less than average. The lack of variability may explain why the relationship failed to emerge. H3 was rejected. The finding is highly inconsistent with the literature. Knowledge is a mainstay of third-person perception research.

H4 predicted a relationship between third-person perception and optimistic bias. Optimistic bias in a group is demonstrated by a group mean significantly less than zero. A single-sample t-test was used to establish that participants believed they were less likely than others to discriminate against people of other ethnic/cultural groups ( $M = -1.2$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ),  $t(185) = -11.2$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, third-person perception increased as optimistic bias increased. H4 was supported. The finding is consistent with the small, but growing literature. Even the earliest optimistic bias investigations (Weinstein, 1980) linked the phenomenon with social desirability: People are more prone to exhibit optimistic bias about something stigmatized (AIDS) than something hereditary (diabetes). It stands to reason that such an influence also comes into play when people are asked to consider themselves as racially discriminatory. This makes interpretation of the findings more complex, but it also makes the people who self-identified as potentially discriminatory all the more interesting.

Drawing from the optimistic bias literature, H5 predicted a relationship between third-person perception and experience with racial hatred or discrimination. Many of the participants (29.6%) reported personally experiencing discrimination; most acknowledged personally witnessing discrimination (60.9%); the remaining participants (9.5%) said they have never been personally exposed. Not surprisingly, there were gender differences and racial differences in levels of personal experience with discrimination. Women ( $M = 4.4$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ) were more likely than men ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ) to experience discrimination,  $t(183) = -2.4$ ,  $p < .001$ . Members of minority groups ( $M = 5.1$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ) were also more likely than Caucasians ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ) to experience discrimination,  $t(184) = -4.2$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, third-person perception decreased as experience with discrimination increased. H5 was supported.

### ***Discussion***

The study documented third-person perception regarding media depictions of other races and cultures, a context which has been neglected thus far in the literature. Because racism is learned, not inherited, it is important to establish how much influence media depictions have on developing children and adolescents. Further studies within the third-person perception framework should consider the behavioral implications of such misperceptions. If youthful viewers believe they are not likely to be influenced, they may become less critical, more passive consumers of media depictions. Due to the consistency of skewed perspectives about minority groups on television, third-person perception would discourage oppositional readings of racist messages. Through the behavioral link with optimistic bias, adolescents may also fail to recognize and address racism when confronted with it, and they may eventually become racists themselves. Both third-person perception and optimistic bias increase with age if not addressed. This underscores the need for early intervention.

The study also explored the impact of knowledge and demographics on third-person perception. In the current study, both failed to yield significant results. Little variability in age (14-18) may have hampered the investigation. Measuring knowledge after exposure to a racism seminar may also have skewed the results. Given the opportunity, pre-testing to set a knowledge base would be a better design.

Finally, the study encourages further consideration of the relationship between optimistic bias and third-person perception. Like previous findings in the small but growing literature, the current study supports the notion that the two are related, but are not the same phenomenon explored in isolation in two different disciplines. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the study is the finding that personal experience predicts third-person perception. The finding is encouraging for further research that draws from the optimistic bias literature to better understand third-person perception. The literature offers other directions like self-concept, self-efficacy, and downward social comparisons, all having yet to be considered by third-person perception scholars.

The study has a number of limitations. Most significantly, the size and composition of the convenience sample limits generalizability to other populations. Limited space in participant evaluations necessitated limited numbers of variables and the use of multiple single-item measures. While these limitations are threats to reliability and validity, the opportunity to conduct this research in the field was a fair trade-off for avoiding yet another study of Caucasian college students. The amount of variance explained by the regression model is relatively small. This suggests that the findings are best used as indicators for further research, rather than as conclusions.

---

#### Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions to this project of Diane Chavez, the Center for Race Relations staff and the anonymous reviewers from the *International Journal of Communication*.

**References**

- Arnett, J. (2000). Optimistic bias in adolescent and adult smokers. *Addictive Behaviors, 25* (4), 625-632.
- Banning S. (2001). Do you see what I see?: Third-person effects on public communication through self-esteem, social stigma, and product use. *Mass Communication & Society, 4*(2), 127-147.
- Chapin, J. (2002). Third-person perception and school violence. *Communication Research Reports, 19*(3) 216-225.
- Chapin, J. (2001). It won't happen to me: The role of optimistic bias in African-American teens' risky sexual practices. *Howard Journal of Communications, 12*, 49-59.
- Davison, W. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 47*, 1-15.
- Duck, J., Hogg, M. & Terry, D. (2000). The perceived impact of persuasive messages on "us" and "them." In D. Terry & M Hogg (Eds.), *Attitudes, behavior and social context: The role of norms and group membership* (pp. 265-291). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hoorens, V. & Ruiters, S. (1996). The optimal impact phenomenon: Beyond the 3<sup>rd</sup> person effect. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 26*(4), 599-610.
- Lo, V. & Paddon, A. (2001). Third-person effect, gender differences, pornography exposure and support for restriction of pornography. *Asian Journal of Communication, 11*(1), 120-142.
- Neuwirth, K. & Frederick, E. (2002). Extending the framework of third-, first-, and second person effects. *Mass Communication & Society, 5*(2), 113-140.
- Peiser, W. & Peter, J. (2000). Third-person perception of television viewing behavior. *Journal of Communication, 50* (1), 25-45.
- Perloff, R. (1999). The third-person effect: A critical review and synthesis. *Media Psychology, 1*, 353-378.
- Perloff, R. (1989). Ego-involvement and the third-person effect of televised news coverage. *Communication Research, 16*(2), 236-262.
- Van de Ven, P., Rawstorne, P., Nakamura, T., Crawford, J. & Kippax, S. HIV treatments optimism is associated with unprotected anal intercourse with regular and with casual partners among Australian gay and homosexually active men. *International Journal of STD and AIDS, 13*(3), 181-185.
- Weinstein, N. (1987). Unrealistic optimism about susceptibility to health problems: Conclusions from a community-wide sample. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 10*(5), 1987.

Weinstein, N. (1980). Unrealistic optimism about future life events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 806-460.

Wu, W. & Ku, S. (2001). Perceived effects of sexually explicit Internet content: the third-person effect in Singapore. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(2), 260-274.