

Third-Person Effect

Brittani Bowman

Southern Polytechnic State University

### Third-Person Effect

Have you ever been enjoying your favorite TV series when someone does something wrong? You might have thought something along the lines of “I would never do something like that, but I can see how someone else might.” This is an example of third-person effect. Third-person effect is defined in the *Converging Media: A New Introduction to Mass Media* textbook as the idea that people underestimate the effect a persuasive message has on them personally and overestimate the effect the message will have on others (Pavlik). People who experience third person effect are confident that media doesn’t affect them, but on occasion they are the most susceptible to the message they believe is affecting everyone else. The definition of third-person effect is pretty self-explanatory; everyone wants to believe that we are immune to negative persuasions and bad decisions. This results in us believing we are smarter than the people around us, and this goes hand in hand with the concept of biased or unrealistic optimism (Banning). Biased optimism is when you are optimistic about the ability of the subject you are biased to, which could be yourself or people close to you (Taylor, Bell & Kravitz), to withstand being swayed to do something. It is believed that this bias comes from knowing our own persuasive ability, and when confronted with persuasion tactics, we use our own but don’t believe that others use theirs (Grier).

Third-person effect is used in mass communication research as a way of studying how media affects our behavior and our perceptions of others’ behaviors, and also to study the psychology behind the effect. We can study the effects it has on the individual, and what causes this to happen. It is known that when the audience receives a message from any mass communication source, or any communication source, that we believe we are independent and intelligent thinkers, and that everyone else is gullible or less intelligent in comparison to

ourselves. Some people like David McRaney, author of book *You're Not So Smart*, believe that third-person effect causes people to believe that they are unique, and not just unique but *more* unique than everyone else they are surrounded by. Raney believes that this thought process will lead to us thinking that we are above everyone else, and that the rest of our community needs to be policed and censored or else they might do something stupid. I think that this is an extreme case, and a bit of a slippery slope scenario, but the research is useful to the discussion either way. It encourages people to think about third-person effect and do more extensive research into the theory.

Third-person effect also has aspects of the theory of media literacy in it. Media literacy is a person's ability to interact with media and analyze it (Pavlik). This can be related to third-person effect because the person experiencing third-person effect believes themselves to be more media literate than others they interact with. This leads to the notion that they are better at decoding the messages received from media, and that the people around them are at risk of falling into a media "trap". The irony of the situation is that just about everyone has applied the third-person effect to themselves, and that we are all actually more connected than most people would like to believe. In most situations, we are actually thinking the same thing; even if it's just the belief that every one of us is more correct or intelligent than everybody else.

A real world application of third-person effect would be in elementary and middle school; the schools hold assemblies and meetings to dissuade students from harmful activities like drugs and violence. But, they also discuss seeking help if you suffer from depression or other mental illnesses. Most students ignore these because of the belief that they'll never be depressed or at risk. Viewers of the content believe the risk to be higher for those around them than themselves (Scherr & Reinemann) because of their own confidence in themselves. A survey

given to an online depression group showed that most participants thought their peers were more affected than themselves (Taylor, Bell & Kravitz). Meaning that the participants in the survey were suffering from similar symptoms, but a high percentage of the surveyed group thought that the others were in a worse condition than themselves.

Another example of third-person effect is when a mass communicated message or a public service announcement (PSA) is sent out, and a viewer is so certain of their immunity to the message that they don't take any steps to counteract it. This can be as innocent as hearing about a scary movie from your friends, and going to see it because you believe that they get scared more easily than you. Obviously you'll be fine, but after you watch the movie you realize that it was pretty scary, and you're not as tough as you had originally thought. Or it can be like how many college freshmen hear about the dreaded "Freshman 15", a 15 pound weight gain after your freshman year. Some freshmen take this to heart and work to prevent the weight gain by eating in moderation and/or working out. Others, who may be experiencing third-person effect, will swear that this won't happen to them no matter what they do, and take no steps to prevent the weight gain (Webb, Butler-Ajibade, Robinson & Lee). A combination of the easy access to food, the general laziness of college students and stress of classes will probably cause them to gain this "Freshman 15". Further proving that just because you believe something won't happen to you doesn't mean you are immune; you have to be proactive about avoiding whatever you're concerned, or rather unconcerned, about.

Third-person effect gets dangerous when people endanger their health to prove a point, like mentioned earlier with not getting help for things like depression or drug usage/abuse. An example being when someone, let's call this person Marty, sees a Meth Project commercial on TV or on a billboard. Marty assumes that they are exaggerating the effects of meth on the human

mind and body, but he also hears that it gives you an unparalleled high, so he tries it. Marty believed that he wouldn't be hurt by this because he doesn't think he'll get addicted, and he'll only try it once. Ironically this situation happens every day, and it's actually the Meth Project's motto (not even once). After trying meth, Marty will almost certainly get addicted and things will only get worse from there.

This is also an example of how third-person effect can be harmful to our society. If a person who is experiencing third-person effect convinces themselves that they aren't suffering as susceptible to a situation as other people, then they won't take steps to prevent it or take steps to get treatment if they do become a candidate for the very thing they were sure they would avoid. It's great to have confidence in yourself, it's actually preferred, but you also need to make sure that you take precautions to prevent avoidable situations.

To pull everything together, third-person effect is an effect that causes people in an audience to believe that everyone surrounding you is more susceptible to a message than you are, and they are in comparison more gullible than yourself. The effect is relatable to the theory of biased optimism, which is a similar concept that states that you are overly confident in whatever subject you are biased to and their susceptibility to a message. Some individuals like David McRaney believe that third-person effect is used by the media to make the audience feel that they are more unique and intelligent than the others around them. Third-person effect has a range of severities from simply thinking that you won't get scared by the self-proclaimed "scariest movie in America" to more serious things like believing you are immune to the effects of illnesses or drugs. In the end, people will always believe that they are able to use their persuasive abilities and media literacy to their advantage, but we still need to be careful of missing the intent of the message in our attempts to prove that we don't need to hear the message.

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