Integrating Theoretical Traditions in Media Effects: Using Third-Person Effects to Link Agenda-Setting and Cultivation

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In an earlier period of mass communication research, scholars were more adventuresome in advancing “new” theories and less hesitant to “create” theory. The 1970s, in particular, bore witness to the emergence of several such theories—from the knowledge gap and agenda-setting to cultivation. Scholars have generated substantial literatures elaborating work in these and other traditions. Those contributions are now sufficiently robust that it is time to direct some of our energies toward synthesizing theories. This article nominates third-person perception as a candidate for such integration. Several

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prominent theories of media effects in the mass communication literature are selected to illustrate how the theories can or have been integrated. Results from three surveys provided evidence that the theories of third-person perception, agenda-setting and cultivation can be interrelated. The proposition examined here can serve as a model for further integration of other media theories. This integration attempt harkened back to the times when theory building in media effects was more common and perhaps more optimistic about explaining processes of influence.

Parsimony is one of the hallmarks of good theorizing (e.g., Casmir, 1994), and scholars responding to this criterion have advanced theory in mass communication by advancing models posed at abstract levels that give direction to researchers. For instance, the work of McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1997) in several places locates agenda-setting within a broader framework of cognitive effects. Each of these theoretical frameworks is certainly useful, but our research in media effects seldom illustrates how existing theories can be linked or integrated.

A review of the literature on media effects over the past couple of decades shows strong lines of investigation in such “branded” theories as agenda-setting, cultivation and mainstreaming, framing and priming, the spiral of silence, diffusion, the knowledge gap, media/channel dependency and even iterations of the venerable two-step flow and hypodermic needle models. In addition, advances in the literature have focused on effects while employing social categories and uses and gratifications as “mitigating” factors or stressing channel media differences (e.g., videomalaise). Others have focused on aspects of the message, the context, the medium, the technology, or the audience in studying particular types of effects (e.g., from civic participation to stereotyping and body image). Of course, we have the application of theories from other domains or disciplines that are necessarily employed and have expanded our knowledge of what happens in media effects, for example, social learning theory, the theory of reasoned action, exchange theory, the elaboration likelihood theory, cognitive consistency, and the hierarchy of effects. This study explores how such integration might be tackled head-on by “cross-tabbing” these theories to see what questions might emerge to help us achieve parsimony. We then discuss how the third-person effects model is a strong candidate for bridging the other “branded” theories in media effects. Following that, we extend our discussion with an example applying third-person effects to two of these traditions—agenda-setting and cultivation. Finally, we describe three studies that explore such a possibility.
EXPLORING LINKS BETWEEN THEORIES OF MEDIA EFFECTS

In an earlier period of mass communication research, scholars (e.g., Hage, 1972) provided actual tools for creating theory by finding new variables, specifying definitions, ordering concepts, statements, and linkages. Hage suggested synthesizing theories as well, but because so few existed within mass communication, creation was the order of the day. Within that decade, we saw the explicit statements forming theories of agenda-setting, cultivation, the spiral of silence theories, uses and gratifications, the knowledge gap, and media dependency.

As the discipline of communication grew, scholars ventured beyond “media effects” and into larger systems models. In the early 1970s, linkages between media effects and the other social sciences seemed a possibility, and this is reflected in the texts that borrow heavily from sociology and psychology (e.g., hegemony theory; Gitlin, 1980). Later in that decade, with the growth of ideological differences and cultural conflicts, discussions within communication became more difficult and ground shifted to emphasize epistemological problems. A special 1983 summer issue of the Journal of Communication, titled Ferment in the Field, is an example of this (e.g., see Rosengren, 1983). Although conflict can be invigorating, stimulating research that otherwise would have failed to materialize, the cultural wars and advance of humanistic thought seems to have retarded both the development of “branded” mass communication theories as well as efforts to integrate the literatures. This has been accompanied by isolationist practices such as scholars attempting to “custom” build theories to fit their own research tracks, often simply putting old wine into new bottles. These are unfortunate developments, because the 1980s and 1990s certainly saw a dramatic expansion of research in media effects and mass communication but little of the explosive development of new theories that help us to describe and explain a world of mass communication constantly in flux.

Here, we put aside the epistemological conflict and place boundaries on our exploration into theory integration, focusing only on the area of media effects within mass communication. We are taking a very practical approach to theory integration, and, to avoid the book-length text necessary for a full treatment of the following, we do not argue differences based on notions of paradigms and perspectives, covering laws, the reliance on subjectivity in human action approaches, systems and institutional perspectives, or traits versus states.

Third-person effects work is ideally suited for efforts to integrate other theories. The notion of third-person effects is based on the difference between people’s perceptions of media effects on themselves versus others.
Davison (1983) argued that communication effects, which we view as media effects, may be due not to audience reactions to the message itself but to their perceptions or anticipation of how others react to the same message. Thus, perceptions of or anticipation of media influence on others is seen as a mediating variable in effects. This posits self-conscious behavior on the part of audiences and places third-person perception into the “limited” effects camp. It should be noted that Davison was talking about “persuasive” messages, which could lead some to argue that third-person perception should operate only with explicitly provocative messages such as commercials, public service announcements, campaign messages, and similar media content rather than apply to news, sitcoms, or radio discussions. In another view, all communication is persuasive by definition, seeking to create some change in the state of audiences, even if it is just imparting a story or fulfilling some gratification. And all media effects theories focus on some form of change in audience beliefs, perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, emotional states, or values. Table 1 presents questions raised by applying third-person effects in the context of nine other theories or research traditions.

There are numerous approaches to theory integration. Long ago, Stinchcombe (1968) showed how to “pit” theories against each other in crucial tests that could shed light on which would receive empirical support in a Darwinian contest of natural selection. This approach is certainly viable when theories contest the same turf and argue for different interpretations of the same phenomenon. Another approach is suitable when theories operate at different levels, and this is the tactic actually followed by some researchers in their theoretical discussions and reviews. Ball-Rokeach (1998) did this in her comparison of assumptions and propositions of media system dependency theory and uses and gratifications (also see Rubin & Windhal, 1986). A third approach largely achieves a synthesis in media theories by “telescoping” them into abstract approaches of other disciplines or other social sciences, turning communication into fodder for semiotics, (e.g., Fortner, 1994). As our purpose is to strengthen theory construction and research within mass communication, we do not pursue this strategy here.

Another approach is to search the conceptual territory covered by each theory, finding common concepts and assumptions, then ask how one theory can inform the questions raised by a second theory. Each theory focuses our attention, leading us to raise questions that allow us to integrate theories and expand our knowledge of media effects. It is useful to consider two theories seldom paired—the spiral of silence and agenda-setting; the former focuses on the expression of opinions in public and the latter on how media set audience agendas through increasing salience with greater coverage.
### Table 1

**Applying Third-Person Perception in the Context of Other Effects Theories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Third-person effects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Agenda-setting</strong></td>
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<td><strong>B. Cultivation and Mainstreaming</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C. Knowledge Gap</strong></td>
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<td><strong>D. Diffusion</strong></td>
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<td><strong>E. Framing/Priming</strong></td>
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<td><strong>F. Spiral of Silence</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>G. Two-Step Flow &amp; Opinion Leadership</strong></td>
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<td><strong>H. Media/Channel Dependency</strong></td>
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(Continued)
Since formulated by Noelle-Neumann (1973) 3 decades ago, the spiral of silence has generated volumes of work, with attention to numerous issues: the extent to which there is a pressure to conform in a context or society, whether the reluctance to express opinions is culture bound, whether and how the reluctance to express opinions in public settings is affected by the climate of opinion, whether there is one or multiple climates of opinion, how that climate of opinion is affected by media coverage, and the accuracy of people’s perceptions of the opinion climate (also see Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Although traced to B. Cohen (1963), the work of McCombs and Shaw (1974) has been more important in stimulating research into agenda-setting, which has focused on numerous issues: the obtrusiveness of issues, models for how issues appear/disappear from public agendas, agenda building, influences on media agendas, intermedia agenda-setting, and processes at the individual level by which salience via attention to media coverage is achieved—including attention, priming, media uses and gratifications, and social categories (see McCombs et al., 1997).

Agenda-setting is often linked to cultivation effects, as both are explaining an audience’s processing of messages leading to accumulative effects across time, but it also can direct us to ask different questions “within”...
the framework of the spiral of silence. Thus, researchers have identified not only media agendas and public agendas but also interpersonal agendas (the relative importance of topics discussed with others) and polling agendas. The focus on interpersonal agendas has received relatively less attention since being raised years ago (see McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974), but it directs us to consider how media influence on interpersonal agendas fits within the spiral of silence. If greater media coverage of an issue raises its salience among audiences, it also increases the likelihood that the topic is promoted for interpersonal discussion. Such coverage is greatest when there is the greatest controversy. The spiral of silence argues that coverage favoring one view will discourage those who see their opinion as declining from expressing their views in public. This creates a dilemma for some citizens, where media coverage promotes their participation in interpersonal discussions (agenda-setting) but “unbalanced” coverage discourages such participation. Add to this mix the current abundance of polls, and the issue changes further. A number of interesting questions are raised for the spiral of silence. Because polls ascertain people’s opinions in “private,” we would expect minority views to receive their due in the percentages rather than creating a “silent majority.” Thus, we’d ask whether the polling agenda affects the media agenda, which affects the interpersonal agenda. We might ask under what conditions such agenda-setting would forestall the hypothesized dynamic of the spiral of silence, to the extent that it would exist in a particular context. The next step is to conduct empirical research that begins to explore some of these relationships and find answers to questions raised. That’s what we propose to do in examining three other theories next.

THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION/EFFECTS AS AN INTEGRATING LINK

The third-person perception effects perspective is particularly well-suited to bridging other theories about effects, as it is an “audience perception” of effects, and we can literally insert variables from different effects models/theories into the slot. In fact, the general third-person literature does incorporate various versions of direct/limited/mediated effects into its considerations. The third-person literature at its core posits a difference between perceived effects on self and others, with the difference between third-person and first-person effects largely being the direction of the effect, that is, whether it is a positive or negative media impact such as improving healthy behaviors or inciting aggression. First-person effects is often used to refer to a tendency to place oneself in a positive light
(White & Dillon, 2000), whereas third-person perception refers to placing others in a more negative light. Reflecting on the research generated over the years, Davison (1996) noted that third-person effect is a complex reaction that varies by type of communication, characteristics of the individual, and the social context.

Evidence supporting the third-person perception effect has been provided by numerous studies in different countries (Chapin, 1999; Davison, 1996; Y. Kim, Ahn, & Song, 1991; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Perloff, 1993, 1999; Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999). Paul et al. (2000) examined 32 studies in a meta-analysis, finding an overall effect size between estimated media effects on self and others \((r = .50)\). However, not all studies have found third-person perception effects (Glynn & Ostman, 1988).

Consequences of the third-person perception have also been studied in several contexts (Hoffner et al., 1999; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998; Salwen, 1998; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997; Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000), but the bulk focuses on explanatory factors or variables influencing the phenomenon (e.g., self-enhancement, attribution theory, biased optimism, social distance from the “others”; see Paul et al., 2000, for a summary of the literature on these theoretical foundations). The basis for third-person perception has been located in self-serving biases (see Eveland & McLeod, 1999), pluralistic ignorance and status responses. Lopez-Saez, Martinez-Rubio, and Arias (1997) noted that third-person perception has been explained in attribution theory as a self-serving bias. Hoorens and Ruiter (1996) argued that people perceive their own responses to the media not as weaker but as more appropriate than other people’s responses. Survey researchers also know that respondents often give responses to avoid offending the interviewer, to please the interviewer, or so they won’t appear in a negative light. This too can influence perceptions of third-person effects in studies based on surveys.

Some explanations for the third-person perception effect have focused on individual characteristics of those perceiving the effects, for example, education and being knowledgeable (Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Lasorsa, 1989), media use (Peiser & Peter, 2000), and self-esteem (David & Johnson, 1998).

The relationship between “self” and “other” also affects perceptions of differential media impact. Studies show that the more distant the “other” person is, or the more dissimilar she or he is to the perceiver, the greater the third-person effect (Gibbon & Durkin, 1995). An experiment by Cohen, Mutz, Price, and Gunther (1988) showed that readers thought defamatory newspaper articles would affect others more than themselves, and the impact was magnified as the “others” became more distant.
In addition, message attributes (Gunther & Thorson, 1992; White, 1997), the nature of the issue (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Duck & Mullin, 1995), the medium or channel (Atwood, 1993; Mason, 1995; Ten Eyck, 1998), and the context (e.g., source bias when people are highly involved, Gunther & Mundy, 1993; political campaign advertising, Cohen & Davis, 1991; and election campaigns, Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Salwen, 1998) are mitigating circumstances for third-person perception effects. As Perloff (1999) noted, because people are more likely to see the reverse—greater impact on self than others—when the message is positive, or pro-social, self-enhancement biases provide a parsimonious explanation.

**Applying Third-Person Perception to Agenda-Setting and Cultivation**

Most of the literature on third-person perception effects has not made a distinction between different types of effects but has asked the public for a “general” impact assessment on a particular topic or behavior. The third-person perception literature has examined the following types of media effects: television effects on thinking aggression is acceptable and viewing the world as a dangerous place, also called “mean-world perceptions” (Hoffner et al., 1999; Salwen & Dupagne, 2001); perceptions of risk of getting skin cancer (Morton & Duck, 2001); public service announcement effectiveness in persuading people on organ donation (White & Dillon, 2000); impact of gambling advertising (Youn et al., 2000); impact of TV programs and commercials on perception of ideal body weight (David & Johnson, 1998); impact of defamatory newspaper articles on people’s opinion of a political and public sports figure (Cohen et al., 1988); impact of commercials on opinions of products (Gunther & Thorson, 1992); perceived impact of three media issues—a drunk-driving advertising campaign, media violence and politics (Innes & Zeitz, 1988), perceived impact of press coverage on opinions of the O. J. Simpson trial (Salwen & Driscoll, 1997). The list shows a variety of contexts (from politics to violence and body perceptions) and dependent measures (beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors). It does include many variables that are comfortable in cultivation studies (e.g., mean world perceptions), but it does not include the key notion in agenda setting—the relative salience of the target subject. We propose to apply third-person perception to not only a traditional impact topic but also to agenda-setting and cultivation, as proposed in Table 1. Because cultivation is based on a long-term notion of media effects, we want to focus on probably the most enduring and hard-to-change variable—the core values that represent what people think is important in life.
We ask people to consider the effect of media on themselves versus others (third-person effects) in three areas: voting choice—a typical and important variable from the literature; agenda setting—what’s important to think about; and values—what’s important in life. The third represents the cumulative impact of cultivation theory. Thus, people are asked to make a distinction between agenda-setting effects, media effects on voting choices, and media effects on values. These three types of effects represent a range from the relatively facile cognitive outcome of agenda setting, to the perceived difficult-to-produce behavioral outcome of voting, to the also difficult-to-generate affective/attitudinal outcome of enduring values. The following hypotheses posit robustness of third-person perceptions for all three:

H1: People will perceive the media as being more important in telling other people what to think about than the media are in telling them what to think about (third-person agenda-setting effect).

H2: People will perceive the media as being more important in telling other people for whom to vote than the media will be in telling them for whom to vote (third-person voting effect).

H3: People will perceive the media as being more important in telling other people what’s important in life than the media are in telling them what’s important in life (media effect on values).

The logic supporting third-person effects generally should apply to all three expectations. We are predicting differences not based on direction. Thus, whether people think the behavior is good or bad, a difference is expected, whether it is based on biased optimism (e.g., they are more informed and thus less vulnerable to media influence on their voting decisions), ego involvement (e.g., I’m a political activist so of course I’m more independent in my judgment than others who are less involved), or self enhancement (e.g., I’m smarter and don’t need help in finding something to talk about).

A separate issue focuses on whether we should expect the differences posed in the three hypotheses to be similar. For example, why would media impact on others (vs. self) be greater for voting effects or values than agenda-setting? A couple factors from the literature are suggestive. First, research tends to show that media are more powerful in producing cognitive effects than in changing affect, values, or behavior (see Jeffres, 1997), and the literature on political communication differentiates between such media effects as the influence of endorsements on voting choices (operationalized as an affective or behavioral effect) and agenda-setting (a cognitive effect; e.g., Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, Oegema, & de Ridder, 2007). Similarly, a distinction can be drawn between agenda-setting effects and media impact on values through the cumulative impact of messages—cultivation (see Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan,
Jackson-Beeck, 1979). We propose to introduce these distinctions in an application of the third-person effects hypothesis. The notion of agenda-setting in an election context posits a relationship between media coverage and audience salience, that is, the greater the prominence of particular issues or topics in media messages, the more salient the topic is among audiences; thus, the media are seen as setting the election agenda, telling voters what’s important in the campaign.\footnote{For a sample of the extensive research on agenda-setting see Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, and McCombs (1998); McCombs and Shaw (1993); McLeod et al. (1997); and Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, and Hamm (1999).}

We also might expect the public to make the same distinction between perceived cognitive effects and perceived effects on values or political behaviors. If the media are more successful in telling people “what to think about” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993) than they are in influencing actual voting behaviors and enduring affective traits, the public might recognize such a difference and demonstrate a smaller “third-person perception gap” for agenda-setting relative to media influence on the direction of one’s vote or on what is important in life. Although untested here, this is an interesting twist on Davison’s argument that media effects may be due not to the message but flow instead from people’s perceptions or anticipation of how others react to the same message.

Another point arguing for differences in third-person perceptions for voting decisions, agenda-setting and values stems from the literature on “self-serving” bias. One could argue that there would be less of a “status response” or “self-serving” bias for acknowledging a media influence that could be viewed as “learning” or “understanding,” compared to accepting the notion that the media tell you whom to vote for or what is important in life. This also is consistent with Hoorens and Ruiter’s (1996) notion that people consider their responses as more appropriate. At the same time, we should not expect the gap between perceptions of media influence on self and other to close completely for either type of effect. Missing from the literature are audience perceptions of the appropriateness of various media effects. Thus, learning from the news is likely to be judged favorably, whereas being influenced by commercials is less likely to be judged favorably. But that appropriateness also is likely to be influenced by the variety of factors in the third-person perception literature; for example, a liberal may think that being influenced by the New York Times editorial page is appropriate, but a conservative would think this entirely inappropriate. Clearly, there is room for more explanatory work here, investigating audience judgment of media effects that take into account individual differences. In the spirit of theory
integration, that line of inquiry might take into account the uses and gratifications that sustain people’s media behavior patterns.

All of these explanatory mechanisms would predict a weaker third-person perception effect for cognitive impacts (i.e., agenda setting) than for either affective/trait (i.e., values) or behavioral (i.e., voting choice) outcomes. Thus, drawing from the confluence of findings in the agenda-setting and third-person traditions, we hypothesize the following:

**H4a:** The third-person perception effect for agenda-setting (telling voters what’s important in the campaign) will be smaller than the third-person effect for media influence on one’s voting choice (an effects gap based on differential assessments).

**H4b:** The third-person perception effect for agenda-setting (telling voters what’s important in the campaign) will be smaller than the third-person effect for media influence on values (what’s important in life; an effects gap based on differential assessments).

As noted, the third perception person effects phenomenon has been applied across a variety of issues, populations, and contexts. Although explanations for the differential perceptions are generally social-psychological tendencies, we might find that people’s experience with the environment and other people—either through interpersonal or mass communication—is also a factor. Indeed, past research has linked such social–psychological orientations as perceived knowledge and self-esteem, both related to communication activity, to the strength of third-person differentials (David & Johnson, 1998; Lasorsa, 1989). In addition, social categories could supplement communication variables to account for some of the difference in third-person effects (e.g., the work of Peiser & Peter, 2000). Because of the limited range and fragmented nature of past work on social categories, communication behaviors, and third-person, no hypotheses are offered at this point, but communication variables and social categories will be scrutinized as potential contributing explanations of the third-person phenomenon.

**METHOD**

The effort to integrate third-person perception effects with agenda-setting and cultivation was explored in a series of surveys. Two surveys were conducted in the 2\(\frac{1}{2}\) weeks leading up to the 2000 presidential election. One survey was conducted in a metropolitan area of the Midwest, with random digit dialing interviews of 505 adults using a computer-aided
telephone-interviewing system. The second was a national survey of 2,172 respondents—conducted over the Internet by a commercial research firm that sends requests to a diverse set of potential respondents—who logged onto the survey site to participate. The interview schedule for the telephone survey and the Internet instrument followed parallel forms, with no differences in wording other than those created by the unique nature of the formats. Thus, the Internet interview included some matrices to display items that were administered serially in the telephone survey.

Third-Person Effects Items for Surveys 1 and 2

There were two items operationalizing third-person agenda-setting effects:

How much influence would you say the media have in telling voters what’s important in the presidential campaign? (The response scale was almost no influence, a little influence, considerable influence, very much influence)

How much influence would you say the media have in telling you what’s important in the presidential campaign? (The response scale was almost no influence, a little influence, considerable influence, very much influence)

There were two items operationalizing third-person media effects on voting choice:

How much influence would you say the media have on people’s actual voting choice in the presidential race? (The response scale was almost no influence, a little influence, considerable influence, very much influence)

How much influence would you say the media have on your voting choice in the presidential race? (The response scale was almost no influence, a little influence, considerable influence, very much influence)

Items referring to people’s voting choice were paired, as were items referring to the respondents being interviewed. In other words, people were asked how much influence the media have in telling voters what’s important in the campaign, and that was followed with the item asking how much influence the media have on people’s actual voting choice. This pair of items then was followed by a second pair asking for the same assessments of

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2The response or cooperation rate was 44% for the metropolitan study. Because the Internet survey was not based on a probability sample, no response rate could be computed. This is less important in situations where the focus is on relationships, not estimating parameters.
media effects on the respondent. Interviewers were trained to emphasize you and your in the second pair to be certain that the distinction was clear and recognized. Numerous other measures were included in the study.3

A third survey was conducted the following summer in the same metropolitan region, using the same random digit dialing sampling procedures and computer-aided telephone-interviewing system.4 The survey was presented as a general poll with an emphasis on values and what people think is important in life. Respondents were asked to rate how important each of 30 values were on a 0 (totally unimportant) to 10 (extremely important) scale. Values ranged from independence, participating in the political system, and pursuing wealth to religious beliefs, being physically fit, and having good friends.5 After a few intervening items, respondents were asked how often the entertainment media as a whole—on television, in movies, in music, on the radio—portray the same set of values. Just before the demographic items at the end of the survey, respondents were asked four items tapping the third-person phenomenon. Thus, there should be no misunderstanding about what was meant by the concept of “values.”

Third-Person Perception Effects Items for Survey 3

There were two items operationalizing third-person agenda-setting effects:

How much influence would you say the media have in giving people ideas or topics to think about or talk about? (The response scale was almost no influence, a little influence, considerable influence, or very much influence)

How much influence would you say the media have in giving you personally ideas or topics to think about or talk about? (The response scale was almost no influence, a little influence, considerable influence, or very much influence)

There were two items operationalizing media influence on values:

How much influence would you say the media have in telling people what’s important in life? (The response scale was almost no influence, a little influence, considerable influence, or very much influence)

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3Contact the authors for measures of other variables not reported here.
4The response or cooperation rate was 45%.
5The roster of 30 values statements was assembled from several sources: All but 3 of the 16 values used by Tan et al. (1997) to study ethnic adolescents were included in the study. In addition, values were added from the Rokeach (1973) scale and the Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990) value types to represent a broader range of values for the general population.
How much influence would you say the media have in telling you personally what’s important in life? (The response scale was almost no influence, a little influence, considerable influence, or very much influence)

Again, items referring to voters were paired, as were items referring to the respondents being interviewed. In other words, people were asked how much influence the media have in telling people what’s important in life, and that was followed with the item asking how much influence the media have in giving people ideas or topics to think about or talk about. This pair of items then was followed by a second pair asking for the same assessments of media effects on the respondent. As before, interviewers were trained to emphasize you and your in the second pair to be certain that the distinction was clear and recognized. Numerous other measures were included in the study.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Profiles of the three samples show that theory testing could proceed with diversity on the relevant social categories. The 2000 metro sample was 43% male and 57% female. Almost half were married, with 11% divorced, 11% widowed, 3% separated, and 24% never having been married. One fifth of the sample was African American, and 64% was White, with the rest other ethnic/racial backgrounds. The 2000 national Internet sample was dominated by women (73%), with 62% married, 14% divorced, 2.3% widowed, 1.4% separated, and 21% never having been married. The sample was 88.6% White. The third survey, conducted in 2001, was 45% male and 55% female, with 43% married, 14% divorced, 11% widowed, 3% separated, and 29% never having been married. One fifth of the sample (21%) was African American, and 64% was White.

6Although 27% of the sample was age 30 or younger, 19% were 31 to 40, 21% 41 to 50, 15% 51 to 60, 10% 61 to 70, and 7% 71 or older. Some 7.7% had less than high school education, whereas 20% were high school graduates, 37% some college, 23% college graduate, and 12% advanced degrees.

7Ages ranged from 27% 30 years or younger, 28% 31 to 40, 27% 41 to 50, 14% 51 to 60, 3.8% 61 to 70, and .6% 71 or older. Less than 1.5% had less than a high school education, whereas 16% were high school graduates, 41% had some college, 30% were college graduates, and 11% had advanced degrees.

8Although 24% were 30 years or younger, 18% were 31 to 40, 21% 41 to 50, 13% 51 to 60, 7% 61 to 70, and 10.5% 71 or older. About 5% had less than a high school education, whereas 20% were high school graduates, 32% some college, 24% college graduates, and 14% had advanced degrees.
The first hypothesis predicted that respondents would perceive a third-person agenda-setting effect. The hypothesis was supported by data from both the metropolitan survey and the national Internet surveys conducted in 2000, as Table 2 shows. On a scale where 1 means the media have almost no influence and 4 means they have very much influence, in the Metropolitan survey perceived influence on agenda-setting for respondents was 2.08, compared to a perceived influence of 2.95 on other voters, and the difference was statistically significant, \( t(487) = 16.9, p < .001 \). In the Internet survey, perceived influence on agenda-setting for respondents was 1.87, compared to a perceived influence of 2.60 on other voters, and that difference also was statistically significant, \( t(2, 154) = 34.7, p < .001 \).

The second hypothesis predicted a third-person effect for media influence on voting decisions. Again, the hypothesis received significant support in

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<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Testing Third-Person Effects (2000 Surveys)</th>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Metropolitan survey</strong></td>
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<td><strong>M</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived media influence on voting(^a)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on self</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on other voters</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived media influence on agenda (what’s important in the presidential campaign)(^b)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on self</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on other voters</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences between perceived third-person effects(^c)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person effect for media influence on voting</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person agenda-setting effect</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. A difference score for third-person effects was computed by subtracting perceived effects on “self” from perceived effects on “other”; thus, the higher the score, the greater the perceived third-person effects, that is, the media affect other people more than self. Paired items and difference scores also have been used by other scholars examining third-person effects (e.g., Hoffner et al., 1999; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997).

\(^a\) Metropolitan survey, \( t(481) = 19.9, p < .001 \) (\( N = 482 \)); national Internet survey, \( t(2, 148) = 38.1, p < .001 \) (\( N = 2,149 \)).

\(^b\) Metropolitan survey, \( t(487) = 16.9, p < .001 \) (\( N = 488 \)); national Internet survey, \( t(2, 154) = 34.7, p < .001 \) (\( N = 2,155 \)).

\(^c\) Metropolitan survey, \( t(478) = 2.7, p < .01 \) (\( N = 479 \)); national Internet survey, \( t(2, 139) = 5.5, p < .001 \) (\( N = 2,140 \)).
both 2000 surveys. In the Metropolitan survey, perceive influence of the media on respondents was 1.88, compared to a perceived influence of 2.89 on other voters, $t(481) = 19.9, p < .001$. In the Internet survey, perceived media influence on voting choices of respondents was 1.70, compared to a perceived media influence of 2.54 on other voters, $t(2, 148) = 38.1, p < .001$.

The 2001 summer survey allowed us to test the first hypothesis a second time as well as test the third hypothesis that predicted a third-person effect on values. Table 3 provides results. Again, the first hypothesis predicting a third-person effect for agenda-setting was supported, operationalized this time as media influence in telling people what to think or talk about ($M$ influence on self = 2.67, $M$ influence on others = 3.26), $t(289) = 10.5, p < .001$. The third hypothesis—predicting a third-person effect of the media on values held by people—received the same confirmation, with greater perceived media effect on others ($M = 3.15$) than on self ($M = 2.19$), $t(289) = 14.8, p < .001$.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that the perceived third-person effect for media influence on voting decisions and on values would be greater than that for media effects on agenda-setting. Again, the hypothesis received support in both of the 2000 election surveys, although the difference was a bit more pronounced in the metro sample (14 vs. 11). The differences between the third-person effects were both statistically significant (see Table 2), $t(478) = 2.7$,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Testing Third-Person Effects (2001 Survey)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>$M$</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived media influence on values$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived media influence on agenda (what to think about or talk about)$^b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences between perceived third-person effects$^c$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person effect for media influence on values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person effect for media influence on agenda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. A difference score for third-person effects was computed by subtracting perceived effects on “self” from perceived effects on “other”; thus, the higher the score, the greater the perceived third-person effects, that is, the media affect other people more than self.

$^a$$t(289) = 14.8, p < .001$ \(N = 290\).

$^b$$t(289) = 10.5, p < .001$ \(N = 290\).

$^c$$t(287) = 5.3, p < .001$ \(N = 288\).
Next, we investigated whether third-person effects were related to either social categories (achievement, ascriptive) or life cycle, individual differences reflected in political philosophy, party identification or community links, and both interpersonal and mass communication variables. Despite substantial sample sizes for two of the three surveys, there was no clear pattern of relationships across the samples, and the handful of statistically significant correlations were likely due to chance. Regression analyses that controlled for social categories did not reveal additional relationships. Thus, it appears likely the third-person phenomenon is due to psychological and dispositional factors noted in the literature and not measured here.

**DISCUSSION**

This study provided evidence that the theories of third-person perception, agenda-setting, and cultivation can be interrelated. Drawing from our theoretical synthesis, the study tested hypotheses (a) linking third-person perception concepts to other media effects (i.e., predicting personal agendas, voting choice, and cultivation of values), (b) predicting size of the third-person effects among these three (with third-person perceptions of media effects on personal agendas smaller than those on voting and values), and (c) placing third-person perceptions as a dependent variable (examining possible relationships among social categories, political variables, media exposure factors, interpersonal communication variables, and third-person perceptions).

The proposition examined here can serve as a model for further integration of other media theories. This integration attempt harkens back to the times when theory building in media effects was more common and perhaps more optimistic about explaining processes of influence. Certainly there is room for more focused lines of inquiry into the theories specifically, which have been apparent in examinations of differences in the nature of issues (e.g., obtrusive vs. unobtrusive), differences in the nature of “other” versus self (e.g., whether the other is similar or distant), differences in the nature of the message (e.g., positive vs. negative, weak vs. strong arguments), and relationships with social characteristics of respondents (e.g., level of education). To this list we add the nature of the “effect” itself, and this is the key to integration in this instance. Others may find alternative ways to integrate theories in media effects or mass communication in general.

Across three surveys, we found support for third-person effects for media influence—on voting, agenda-setting, and values; all hypotheses were
supported. The fourth hypothesis, in particular, received support in both telephone surveys, with a larger third-person effect for media influence on voting than on agenda-setting and a larger effect for media influence on values than on agenda-setting, suggesting audiences recognize differences in how media affect them.

However, subsequent analyses on likelihood of opinion expression uncover few significant patterns between third-person effects and social categories, individual differences reflected in political identification or community links, or interpersonal and mass communication variables. We can interpret this disconnect by noting that the third-person effects phenomenon is traced to psychological factors rather than social patterns or communication behaviors. The lack of relationships with other variables is consistent with a focus on psychological factors as the source of third-person effects. The third-person phenomenon has been predicated on notions of social desirability in responding to interviewers, pluralistic ignorance, and status responses (e.g., Perloff, 1999). Our results are consistent with these factors, but the differential third-person result for agenda-setting versus voter influence suggests that audiences may have a more complex view of media effects and this should be investigated further. The fact that audiences respond differently to pro-social versus anti-social messages also suggests that audiences do not treat “effects” as unidimensional. People may have different perceptions of which of the following effects are acceptable, or at least tolerable—media displacement of other activities, media effects in keeping them entertained (satisfying specific uses and gratifications), media effects that are cognitive—not only agenda setting but also learning and image formation, and media effects on children’s perceptions, attitudes, and behavior.

This brings up the point that the media environment today is most complex and we shouldn’t expect audiences to be more realistic in their assessments of how the media affect them. We might extend the research on risk communication into the third-person effects area, asking whether people differentiate between what they view as serious risks from media exposure and those that are seen as inconsequential. Later work might profitably expand on our call to integrate theoretical traditions in media effects by using third-person perception as a link between agenda-setting and cultivation theories.

REFERENCES


