PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF TELEVISION INFLUENCE AND OPINIONS ABOUT CENSORSHIP IN SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

It is a common assumption that in many countries mass media censorship is imposed by an authoritarian government on an unwilling public. This study examines public opinion about television censorship in the island nation of Singapore. More specifically, we tested the third-person effect hypothesis, which suggests that people expect media content to have more negative influence on others than on themselves, and that some support for censorship is based on that perceptual bias.

Data for the study came from face-to-face interviews with 506 randomly selected Singaporeans who evaluated ten categories of 'sensitive' television content. Results revealed (1) a substantial perceptual bias in all content categories; (2) generally strong opinion favoring censorship of television content; and (3) a significant relationship between these two factors, suggesting that people may support censorship of media in part because of a tendency to overestimate its negative influence.

As many nations in the developing world move closer to democratic political and economic structures, freedom of information has become an increasingly salient issue. But progress in areas of free speech has not necessarily kept pace with other kinds of development. It is a common assumption in such cases that control of mass media and other sources of information is exercised by autocratic governments, and imposed on an unwilling public.

While the scenario of a repressed public is certainly accurate at times, an important question is to what extent, and why, a nation's populace may itself support constraints on the content of mass media. People in a developing nation may oppose official constraints on information for widely understood reasons—reasons such as the political and social importance of a well-informed populace, or a concern for individual liberty. But citizens in such nations may also have good reasons for supporting censorship. They may do so because of

concerns about the stability of the economy, or concerns about maintaining harmony among racial or ethnic groups. They may also favor censorship of mass media because of concern over negative effects on a society's moral structure, or the potential erosion of traditional values.

Many of these attitudes reflect people's concerns about others, and such concerns relate to a more specific hypothesis in this study. A great deal of research has shown that people commonly demonstrate a curious discrepancy when they consider the effects of mass communication on themselves and on society in general. The phenomenon, often called the 'third-person effect,' has two components. First, people are prone to estimate that many kinds of media content will influence others more than themselves. Second, and most important, people may react in some way according to this estimate of larger effects on others. In other words, people tend to consider themselves less vulnerable to perceived harmful influences of mass media, and their support for restrictions may be rooted instead in their concern about effects on others (see, e.g., Davison 1983, Cohen *et al.* 1988, Mutz 1989, Lasorsa 1989, Gunther 1995). Thus, censorship of mass media content is often justified in the public mind by the perception that a message will have undesirable effects on society, though not on the self.

BEHAVIORAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION

Existing research on the third-person effect has focused mainly on documenting the first component, the perceptual bias, and there is plentiful empirical evidence of the tendency to perceive greater media influence on others than on the self (for a review see Perloff 1993). Most research, however, has examined the perceived influence of just one type of media content or issue coverage, and so this study was designed to measure respondents' perceptions across a range of content categories.

While this perceptual bias in the third-person hypothesis has been well documented, its importance depends crucially on its consequences. However, only one study has thus far demonstrated solid evidence of a connection between the perceptual bias and attitudes or behaviors. That study, asking respondents about the perceived influence of X-rated media content, found that as the discrepancy between perceived negative influence on self and others increased, sentiment favoring censorship also increased (Gunther 1995). Although 'behavioral' outcomes like censorship are central to the ultimate significance of the third-person effect, few other studies have attempted to document this second component, and they have produced mixed or ambiguous results (Mutz 1989, Rucinski and Salmon 1990, Gunther 1991, Rojas *et al.* 1996). Exploring further

evidence of the second component was a major goal of this study, for any relationship between the perceptual bias and public opinion redefines the third-person perception—rather than an intriguing curiosity it becomes a psychological factor with real social consequences.

Several theoretical rationales might explain the third-person perception. Most appear related in some respect to optimistic bias—the idea that, to maintain a positive sense of self, people will see themselves as less likely to experience negative or harmful events than others (Weinstein 1989). In support of this explanation, experimental research has demonstrated that people perceive more influence on others only in the case of media content with apparently harmful potential (see, e.g., Gunther and Mundy 1993).

Theories underlying the second component of the third-person hypothesis may involve distinctly different processes. People may react to perceived negative effects on others because of simple altruism—the act of putting social concerns ahead of personal interests. Or they may react out of ultimate self-interest—the belief that what is good for society, in the end, makes society a better place for the self.

This entire body of self- and social-level conceptualization, however, is subject to a caveat. It is argued that social psychology has taken a monocultural approach to construals of the self and others. The Western view of the self is of a unique and bounded individual who seeks to maintain independence from others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Research on cultural differences suggests that Asian conceptions of the self and others are significantly more integrated, that they center on 'the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other' (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 224; see also Triandis 1989) and that Asian cultures emphasize belonging and fitting in, rather than individual uniqueness.

Typical research on the third-person effect, conducted almost exclusively in the U.S. cultural context, envisions each individual's conception of self as distinct from others. A natural consequence of this distinction is to see others affected differently by societal institutions like mass media. And the theoretical justification for this phenomenon, as noted above, is based on an optimistic bias, the ego-reinforcing motivation for people to see themselves as smarter or better off than others. However, the alternative conception of self and others as interdependent would suggest, for Asian cultures, that the optimistic bias is less likely to operate, and therefore that people are less likely to see themselves as different from others and less likely to consider others more vulnerable to mass media influences (compare Heine and Lehman 1995).[1] How much this influences third-person perception, is an open question. We do not, however,

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[1] The non-Western conception of self, however, puts an additional twist on explanations for the third-person effect. While it may reduce the likelihood that people will see themselves as different from others, it may increase the likelihood that people will react to perceived influences on others.

expect that third-person perception is altogether absent from an Asian culture.

The island nation of Singapore, one of Asia's celebrated 'little tigers,' provides an ideal context for this study. It is a prosperous and cosmopolitan city-state with a sophisticated media infrastructure. It is a model nation in many respects—clean, orderly, nearly crime free, with negligible corruption and many democratic economic and social policies (Sesser 1992, Crossette 1995). But Singapore has been criticized for some authoritarian practices and institutions, prominent among them a mass media unapologetically controlled by government (Hachten 1993, Kamm 1995), and it is not clear to what extent people support this official censorship. Also notable is that Singapore has taken the lead in promoting a philosophical array of 'Asian. values,' with emphasis on core beliefs like the importance placed on society vs. the unique individual (Koh 1993, Emmerson 1995).

Thus this research was designed to put the third-person hypothesis to the test in a number of challenging circumstances: (1) a political climate where the mass media are already firmly under government control; (2) a cultural context in which a more socially integrated view of the self may not incline people to separate perceptions about themselves and others; and (3) a broader range of types of media content than has been tested before. In addition, the range of content categories provided us with a field manipulation suitable for testing the optimistic bias explanation. If people perceive less potential harm in some types of television content, the optimistic bias model would predict less third-person perception for those categories. Also, we intended to look for further documentation of the 'behavioral' component of the third-person effect. Hypotheses took the following form:

H1: Respondents will perceive more negative influence from 'sensitive' media content on the average Singaporean than on themselves.

H2: As the perceived negative influence of content categories decreases, the perceived difference between self and others will also decrease.

H3: To the extent that respondents perceive greater influence of media content on others relative to themselves, they will express greater support for censorship of such content.

METHOD

Data for this study were gathered in face-to-face interviews with 506 adult (18 years-of-age and older) Singaporeans from May through August, 1994. We employed a stratified random sampling scheme to select respondents. Most Singapore residents live in compact complexes of public, high-rise apartment blocks which are congenial to representative sampling. We first randomly

selected complexes and blocks, and then followed a systematic procedure for the selection of floor, flat and household member. A similar randomization scheme was followed in private housing estates and residential areas. If interviewers encountered no answer or a refusal they went to adjacent flats or residences, following an established pattern, until an interview was completed. While this next-door replacement procedure compromised the final randomization step somewhat, it had two benefits: it replaced a non-response household with one likely to be similar, and it made the cost of face-to-face interviewing affordable. Statistics from the sample closely matched demographic parameters in 1994 Singapore—including gender, race, age, housing-type and marital status, although respondents tended to be somewhat better educated and have a higher income than the average Singaporean.

Interviewers were upper-level students at the National University of Singapore. They were trained in interviewing techniques, and they pretested the survey for two weeks before the final version was put into the field.

The interview took 20–25 minutes and was conducted in the respondents' language of choice. English is widely used in Singapore, but when a respondent expressed preference for a language (e.g., Mandarin, Malay, Tamil) other than English, a backup interviewer of matching ethnicity returned to administer the questionnaire. They answered questions about their use of mass media, their opinions about the effects of television content and censorship of such content, and various demographic measures. Many blocks of questions made use of the same response scales, and these scales, on printed cards, were handed to respondents at appropriate times so that they could easily and continually refer to all response options.

Early in the survey, interviewers introduced a block of ten questions on 'sensitive topics you can see on television these days—like sex and violence.' Respondents were asked about their perceptions of the influence of television portrayals of violence, extramarital sex and adultery, homosexuality and lesbianism, foreign television programs, programs with religious themes, foul language, men with long hair, premarital sex, women who choose to have children without being married, and nudity or partial nudity. Respondents were asked to rate the influence of such content on 'themselves personally,' and they were also asked to rate influence on 'the average Singaporean.' Interviewers asked them to respond to each question using the following response scale (displayed on the printed card): (1) large negative influence; (2) small negative influence; (3) no influence; (4) small positive influence; (5) large positive influence.[2]

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[2] The scale was recoded to a range from −2 (large negative influence) to +2 (large positive influence) for some of the analyses shown below.

Asking people to rate influences on both themselves and others introduces the potential for biased responses, since answers to the second question may be altered by answers to the first. To provide a check on this possible order effect, we randomly assigned people to one of two versions of the questionnaire—asking either about self first, or about the average Singaporean first.

To measure support for censorship, we next asked respondents about their opinions on the regulation of TV content. For all of the above topics (again using a printed response card), people were asked 'Do you personally think censorship of [TV violence/other topics] (1) should be a lot more strict; (2) should be a bit more strict; (3) is about right as it is; (4) should be a bit more liberal; (5) should be a lot more liberal?'

RESULTS

Our first hypothesis proposed that people would perceive more negative influence from 'sensitive' TV content on the average Singaporean than on themselves. The data confirmed this notion in every case. For every content area, a majority of Singaporeans thought there would be more negative (or, in the case of religious programs, less positive) influence on others.

Not every person saw more negative influence on others, but that was the perception of a substantial majority. For example, in the case of TV violence, 60 percent of respondents thought there would be more negative influence on other Singaporeans, 27 percent perceived no difference, and only 12 percent reported more negative influence on self. Though for other content areas the differences were less extreme, they generally followed the same pattern.

Only for portrayals of men with long hair, foreign programs, and religious programs did the 'more negative influence on others' category fall clearly below 50 percent, and in every case they remained substantially larger than in the 'more negative influence on self' group. With two exceptions, discussed further below, the percentage of people who reported more negative effect on self was small and stable—between 9 and 12 percent.

However, the reliability of these perceptions is important to verify. The major question, as noted above, is whether respondents give accurate answers once they know they are being asked to compare themselves to others. The reliability of this comparison is most likely to be threatened by a problem of social desirability, that is, a motivation to look good in one's own eyes, or the eyes of the interviewer.

Social desirability might prompt a respondent, for example, to want to present him or herself as less susceptible to negative influences—influences that might diminish moral values or behaviors—than other Singaporeans might be. The

theory behind this study, the theory of an ego–enhancing mechanism called the 'optimistic bias,' suggests that many people see themselves in this way. But do the results truly reveal it, or are they simply a product of the order of questions in this survey instrument?

If the third-person perception is merely an artifact of question order, one would expect to see respondents adjusting their second answer. For example, a respondent who answered about influence on self first might adjust her answers to the second block of questions so that others appeared more vulnerable or susceptible compared to herself. A respondent answering about others first, on the other hand, could adjust his answers to the second block in the other direction to improve his own rating relative to others. Such a pattern of adjustments would suggest artifactual differences, rather than genuine perceptions. Randomly ordering the self and other question blocks allows for an effective test of this potential problem, since the block asked first provides an uncontaminated control group (see also, Price and Tewksbury 1996).

We used independent samples t-tests to compare the mean scores on each question—ten questions regarding the effect on self and ten on the effect on others—for the two groups. In 19 out of the 20 cases, the t-tests revealed no significant differences. Respondents did not adjust their second answer. The only exception was for religious programming, where subjects answering about others second gave, on average, a significantly lower score. While this result may be meaningful, it must be tempered by the probability that we should expect one relationship out of 20 to be significant at this ($alpha = .05$) level by chance.

However, future research should not, we believe, consider the order effect problem settled. It will remain a threat to validity in all self–other comparisons.

Another way to test the third-person perception hypothesis is to compare the average estimate of influence on self to influence on others. For example, the mean respondent rating for perceived influence of TV violence on self was -0.25, while influence on the average Singaporean was rated at -0.88 (a lower score represents more negative influence). Table 1 displays the mean estimates of influence on both self and others, along with t-tests. Differences were significant at the $p<.001$ level in all ten cases, lending further support to hypothesis 1. A graphic representation of these differences is displayed in Figure 1.

As a test of the optimistic bias, hypothesis 2 predicted that as the perceived negative influence of content categories decreased, the perceived difference between self and others would also decrease. The difference column in Table 1 illustrates the pattern predicted in H2. However, Figure 1 reveals that for the final two categories, perceived influence doesn't simply decrease, it actually reverses.

Upper categories in Figure 1 deal with sex-related content, and show a consistent contrast in perceptions. The lower part pictures the five additional
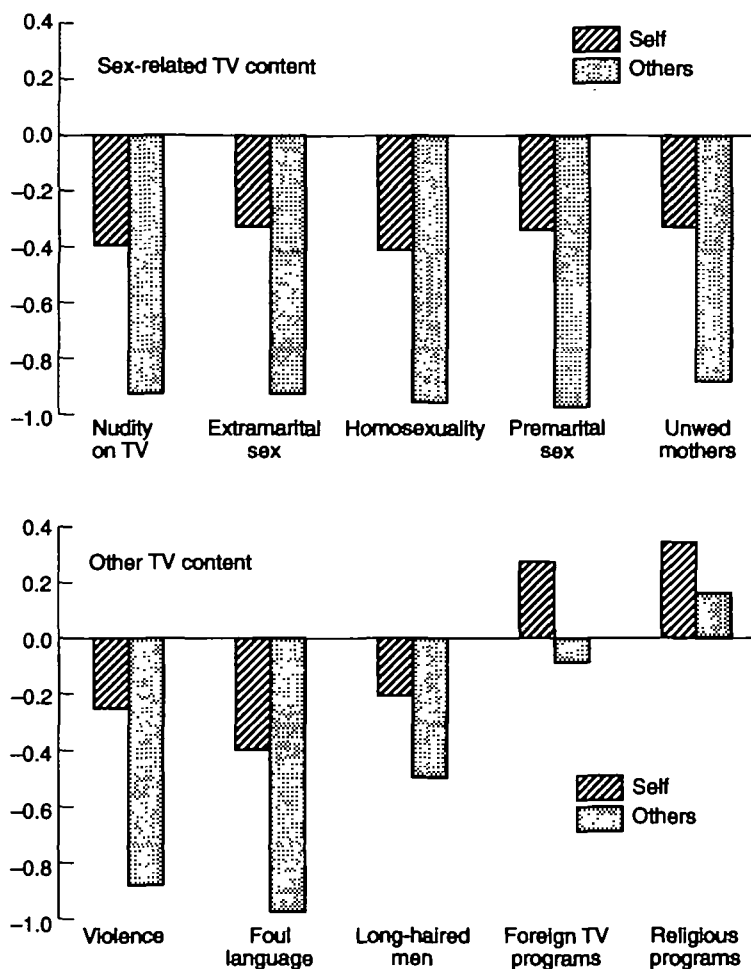
FIGURE 1 Perceived effects of TV content. Negative values indicate perceived negative influence.

content categories, and shows a more varied result. For foreign and religious programs, people perceived on average a positive influence, rather than a negative one. More specifically, for foreign TV programs respondents in the aggregate reported a positive influence on themselves, but a small negative influence on other Singaporeans. In other words, people seem to feel foreign programs are actually good for them personally, but nevertheless not good for other people. In the case of religious programming, people went further in the positive direction, estimating that religious programming would have positive influences on both themselves and others. However, they reported a fairly

TABLE 1 Mean estimates of effect of television content on self and others

	Effect on self	Effect on others	Difference	t
Violence	−0.25	−0.88	.63	12.2***
Premarital sex	−0.34	−0.97	.63	12.6***
Extramarital sex	−0.32	−0.92	.60	12.5***
Foul language	−0.40	−0.98	.58	11.8***
Illegitimate children	−0.33	−0.88	.55	10.9***
Homosexuality	−0.40	−0.96	.55	11.6***
Nudity	−0.39	−0.92	.53	11.3***
Men with long hair	−0.20	−0.51	.31	7.6***
Foreign programs	+0.26	−0.09	.35	6.8***
Religious programs	+0.34	+0.17	.17	3.9***

Note: Effect items were recoded so that −2 = large negative effect, −1 = small negative effect, 0 = no effect, 1 = small positive effect, 2 = large positive effect. Significance levels were calculated using paired t-tests.

*** $p < .001$.

strong positive influence on the self, and a significantly less strong, but still positive, influence on the average Singaporean. This result is particularly persuasive in support of the optimistic bias explanation.

These two special cases illustrate what has sometimes been called the 'first-person' effect. In these cases people actually perceive *more* effect on themselves than on others. However, the greater perceived personal-level effect is a positive one. While perceived positive influence for these two categories goes in a direction opposite to the norm, the pattern of results for the positive and negative programs is the same. That is, for the positive categories there is a greater positive influence on the self and less (or none) for others. In the negative categories there is less negative influence on the self and more negative influence on others.

In summary then, the data show that Singaporeans in general believe sensitive content like sex and violence in television programs will have a significantly greater negative influence on other Singaporeans than on themselves personally. The two partial exceptions occur for programming that is seen as having positive influences.

An important descriptive question addressed in this study is to what extent Singaporeans favor or oppose censorship. Public support for censorship appeared to be strong. For most of the 'sensitive' categories—extramarital sex, homosexuality, premarital sex, unwed mothers, nudity, foul language—a majority of Singaporeans said they felt censorship should be more strict. In these categories

TABLE 2 Opinion distribution (in percentages) and mean scores* concerning censorship in Singapore, by content category

	Censorship[b]			
	Should be more strict	About right as is	Should be more liberal	Mean
Violence[c]	43	38	19	2.6
Premarital sex	59	34	7	2.2
Extramarital sex	53	40	8	2.3
Foul language	56	38	6	2.4
Illegitimate children	49	42	10	2.4
Homosexuality	61	32	7	2.2
Nudity	52	38	10	2.3
Men with long hair	27	63	10	2.8
Foreign programs	21	48	31	3.2
Religious programs	15	63	22	3.1

* Support for censorship was measured on a 5-point scale where 1 = should be a lot more strict, 2 = should be a bit more strict, 3 = is about right as it is, 4 = should be a bit more liberal, and 5 = should be a lot more liberal.

[b] Values 1 and 2, and 4 and 5, were collapsed for display in this table.

[c] Rows may not add to 100% due to rounding.

another 30–40 percent said they felt current levels of censorship were appropriate. Ten percent or fewer thought censorship should be relaxed. (Table 2 illustrates these results.) Support for censorship of portrayals of violence and men with long hair was less dramatic, but still strong.

Opinions about foreign TV programs appeared more divided: 21 percent felt censorship should be more strict, while 31 percent said it should be more liberal. Religious programming also received a mixed result, although 63 percent felt the current level of restriction was about right. Only in these two categories did the mean response fall on the 'more liberal' side of the scale.

The central focus of this research, however, is not opinion regarding censorship *per se*, but rather its relationship to the difference between perceived influence on self and others. Hence the third hypothesis: the third-person perception—the tendency to see others as more negatively influenced than the self—will be positively related to support for censorship of television content. To test this hypothesis we analyzed the relationship between opinion about censorship and an array of factors that might influence such opinions. Respondents' age or gender, for example, may affect their support for censorship. People with more education might oppose strict censorship, while people with children might be

expected to support it. We also included income, religion (vs. no religion or 'free thinkers'), marital status and exposure to entertainment television in the analysis. We added these characteristics in blocks, so as to examine their cumulative effect in predicting opinion about censorship.

In two final steps, we first added respondents' estimations of influence of the content categories on themselves, and finally the difference between estimates of effect on self and other Singaporeans (the third-person perception).

Adding factors in steps or blocks serves a number of purposes: (1) it allows us to examine the effects of multiple factors simultaneously—a more realistic picture of the actual process; (2) it tells us how much each additional factor adds in explaining the outcome of interest; and (3) it provides the most conservative test of the explanation. It is the most cautious test because it examines the influence of the third-person perception in opinion regarding censorship only after the effects of the many other potential predictors are factored in. The multiple regression thus provides controls for other factors, but, most importantly, it allows us to pit the two most salient causes—effect on self and the self–other difference—against one another. The self–other difference is the variable of most interest, and so we entered it into the equation last.

Since respondents evaluated ten television content areas, this detailed analysis results in ten equations, each predicting support for censorship of one category— violence, premarital sex, long hair, and so on. To give a global picture, Table 3 reports standardized regression coefficients for all ten categories. Asterisks indicate the level of significance for each factor, and these significance levels reveal that the two variables of primary interest in this study—perceived effect on self, and the perceived additional negative effect on others—play the strongest role in shaping opinion regarding censorship.

Among the other variables, income was the only one to make a consistently meaningful difference. People with higher incomes were less likely to favor stricter censorship. This was true for all categories except portrayals of men with long hair, and religious programs.

Other factors showed only an occasional association with the outcome variable. Women were significantly more likely to favor stricter censorship of violence; men were somewhat more likely to favor stricter censorship of religious programming. Age played no significant role in all categories except violence, and portrayals of men with long hair; in both cases, as one might expect, older people tended to support more censorship. Education and children in the household appeared to have no role in shaping attitudes toward censorship, and religion mattered only in the case of foul language, where, surprisingly, people without any stated religious affiliation were slightly more likely to support censorship. Married respondents were significantly more likely to favor cen-

TABLE 3 Standardized regression coefficients showing effect of demographic and perceptual factors on attitudes toward censorship of television content

	Violence	Pre marital sex	Extra marital sex	Foul language	Illegitimate children	Homosexuality	Nudity	Foreign programs	Long hair	Religious programs
Age	−.17**	.03	−.05	−.06	−.05	.02	−.06	−.08	−.21***	−.01
Sex	−.19***	.00	.00	−.09	.05	.04	−.07	−.06	−.04	.10*
Income	.13*	.21***	.27***	.19***	.19***	.15*	.20***	.12*	.06	.00
Education	−.04	.08	.04	.08	.09	.11	.08	.09	.10	.03
Religion	.05	.00	−.01	−.09*	.00	.02	−.02	.04	.06	−.01
Marry	−.07	−.15*	−.13	−.18*	−.13	−.18*	−.01	.02	.06	.02
Child	.07	.04	.02	−.02	−.05	−.08	.07	.06	.08	.06
TV content	.08	.09*	.06	−.03	.02	.07	.07	.02	.10*	−.05
Effect of self	.26***	.36***	.37***	.23***	.45***	.42***	.45***	.33***	.33***	.37***
Self–other difference	.24***	.23***	.30***	.16**	.32***	.35***	.30***	.20***	.26***	.21***

$*p<.05$ $**p<.01$ $***p<.001$.

Note: Lower score on the dependent variable indicates support for stricter censorship. Other variables coded as follows: sex (1 = male, 2 = female); religion (1 = any religious affiliation, 2 = no religious affiliation); marry (1 = married, 2 = not married); children in household (1 = yes, 2 = no); TV entertainment (1 = low, 6 = high); effect on self (1 = large negative effect, 3 = no effect, 5 = large positive effect); self–other difference (−4 = more negative effect on others, 0 = no difference, 4 = more negative effect on self). Increment to R^2 values were not included in this table in the interest of parsimony, and because they parallel the results described here.

TABLE 4 Increment to R^2 for 'Effect on self' and 'Self–other difference' in predicting support for censorship of TV content, by ten content categories

	Full sample		Respondents showing third-person perception	
	Effect on self	Self–other difference	Effect on self	Self–other difference
Illegitimate children	.07***	.07***	.00	.10***
Premarital sex	.06***	.04***	.00	.08***
Nudity	.09***	.06***	.03**	.06***
Extramarital sex	.05***	.07***	.03**	.05***
Homosexuality	.06***	.08***	.00	.04**
Foul language	.02**	.02***	.00	.02*
Violence	.02**	.04***	.00	.05***
Long hair	.04***	.05***	.03*	.04**
Foreign programs	.07***	.04***	.06***	.04**
Religious programs	.09***	.04***	.15***	.02

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

sorship in the categories of premarital sex, foul language and homosexuality. Exposure to entertainment television made little difference, although in a few cases higher exposure was related to more liberal attitudes toward censorship.

To further condense the results, and put a spotlight on the factors of most interest, Table 4 gives a summary picture of the relative effect of the two variables with the strongest influence on censorship opinions. For each content category, it shows the percent of variance in the dependent variable—support for censorship—explained by the two independent variables—perceived influence on self, and the perceived self–other difference.

Results from the full sample of 500 + Singaporeans are listed in the first two columns. In general, a person's estimate of influence on him or herself has a significant effect on support for censorship. The more negative that influence is seen to be, the more that person supports stricter constraints on television content. However, even after controlling for effect on self, the third-person perception shows a strong relationship with support for censorship. This result suggests that people's assessments of media influence on themselves affects their attitudes about censorship, but that the third-person perception has an additional and independent effect that is equally important.

However, there is another way to examine the central idea in the third-person effect, and that is by focusing only on those respondents who perceive more negative influence on others than on themselves. In almost all cases these are

the majority, but they are also the people most likely to be overestimating negative influence on others. Results of this analysis are shown in the third and fourth columns of Table 4. With this subsample one can see more dramatic evidence of the third-person effect. Support for stricter censorship is strongly related to the self–other difference, but shows relatively less connection to perceptions of effect on self.

The reader will note at the bottom of Table 4, however, two exceptions. In the cases of religious programs and foreign programs—those that most people consider to have more positive influences—the pattern is reversed. Support for censorship is more strongly related to perceived influence on self. Its relationship with the less positive, or more negative, influence seen on others is sharply reduced.

CONCLUSIONS

PERCEPTUAL BIAS

Singaporeans did find the influence of the 'sensitive' television content categories primarily harmful, but substantially more harmful to others than to themselves. Their estimates of harmful influence were consistent regarding the sex-related categories, and for TV portrayals of violence and foul language. Portrayals of men with long hair were seen as less harmful, but still negative in effect. Religious programming was the one clear-cut exception; in this case most respondents reported positive influences. Estimated influence was most ambiguous for foreign programming. In general, respondents reported that foreign programs would have positive influences on themselves, but a negative effect on the average Singaporean. This finding suggests that people see the potential for both kinds of influences in foreign programs, and that most think they are personally able to derive benefits from the positive side of such programs, but that others will be vulnerable to the negative elements.

OPTIMISTIC BIAS

This difference in perceived effects of foreign programs perhaps best exemplifies a plausible explanation for the third-person perception. We believe that an important underlying reason for this perceptual bias is the tendency for people to see others as more vulnerable to undesirable experiences or influences than themselves—a mechanism to maintain self-esteem. These data, based on repeated measures of perceived influence across ten content areas, give some persuasive support to the optimistic bias explanation. When the influence of media content appears harmful, respondents perceive more of that influence on others, but

when the influence is seen as positive, they expect to experience more influence themselves. It is probable that, unlike the negative categories of sex and violence, people find foreign TV programs and programs with religious themes to have more beneficial than harmful elements—at least to an intelligent and discerning viewer. Therefore, respondents attribute greater influence to themselves. This outcome, an interesting twist on the classic third-person perception, is also consistent with the optimistic bias.

These findings are additionally persuasive because, while previous tests of the optimistic bias were experimental, with university students as subjects, these survey data document the third-person perception in a large population and add a measure of external validity to the explanation. A useful question for further research would be to determine whether the optimistic bias is a character trait, or a response to the situation. Self–other differences across the ten issues in this study produced fairly high reliability ($alpha = .79$), favoring a personality explanation. But ratings of religious and foreign programs were more mixed (item–total correlations were .13 and .26 respectively), suggesting that situation may matter as well.

ORDER EFFECT

It is an important element of this study that respondents appear to be giving genuine answers to the questions about their perceptions of media influence. Without the order–effect test, we could not be confident that the differences were not simply a result of the way questions were asked.

THE CULTURAL FACTOR

In addition, people in this study exhibited the perceptual bias just as strongly and consistently as have their counterparts in Western cultures where most third-person effect research has been conducted. At least in the non-Western context of Singapore, the majority of people were very much inclined to separate their conceptions of self from that of others in questions of media influence. The Asian conception of a self more integrated with society may be quite real in Singapore, but it does not seem to interfere with the third-person perception.

OPINION ABOUT CENSORSHIP

Singaporeans represented in this survey were concerned about many facets of television content, and, generally, were heartily in favor of censorship. Given the heavy degree of existing government censorship, this may not seem surprising. But these respondents did not simply support the status quo. They

voiced highly variable opinions. In the 'sensitive' or 'harmful' categories—such as sex and violence—those approving of current censorship levels ranged from 32 to 42 percent. But interestingly, in every case they were outnumbered by those saying censorship should be more strict—often a lot more strict. Only in the case of religious programs and men with long hair did a majority say censorship is about right as it is. And foreign programs received the most sympathy, 31 percent saying censorship should be more liberal.

The portrayals of violence category also presents an unusual case. While it rated among the categories highest in perceived harmful influence, 20 percent of respondents nevertheless said it should be liberalized. In the other 'harmful' categories, opinion favoring more liberal censorship never rose above 10 percent. This difference suggests that violence may be a special case—a type of content that is perceived as harmful, but nevertheless meets with less objection.

A question of reliability comes naturally to mind when one considers the censorship responses. It is possible that the survey respondents were giving 'politically correct' answers to the censorship questions. That is, they may have been concerned about their anonymity, or other issues, and may have given answers which they felt would meet with official approval. If that were the case, however, one would expect most people to choose the option saying censorship is 'about right as it is,' an affirmation of existing policy. The fact that many respondents said censorship should be even more strict argues that they are voicing opinions that are truly conservative, but also genuine.

THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

While official censorship of mass media in Singapore makes an easy target for critics of the government, these data indicate that there is strong public support for censorship as well. Why censorship receives such popular support is the central question in this study. One answer is clearly related to income; low income groups, perhaps those holding more traditional values, seem to have more conservative views while Singaporeans in the higher income levels favor more liberal censorship policies. Also, as expected, the degree of harmful influence people perceive—both on themselves and on others—plays a major role in how much they think sensitive television content should be censored. But most interesting of all, among those who think others are more negatively influenced than themselves (the majority in all cases), it is the perceived *additional* influence on others that primarily predicts support for censorship.[3]

[3] The possibility that respondents in this survey may have been inclined to give 'politically correct' answers more in line with official censorship policies, while a potential problem in gauging actual opinion about censorship, is a lesser threat to the validity of the third-person effect relationship. Such response bias is likely to be more-or-less systematic; that is, people will adjust their answers (if they do so at all) in a similarly conservative direction. While such a pattern might bias the censorship responses themselves, it would not affect the relationship between perceived influence and opinions about censorship.

In other words, the opinions of people prone to the third-person perception stem largely from their perception of a differential effect on others, rather than any effect on themselves.

While these findings focus on public opinion favoring censorship, sound theoretical reasons exist to suggest that politicians and policy makers may be even more prone to the third-person effect than are ordinary citizens (Schönbach and Becker 1995). And to compound the irony, while restrictions on content may be based on false perceptions of influence on others, they may increase the personal appeal of that very same restricted content. 'Almost invariably, our response to banned information is to want to receive that information to a greater extent and to become more favorable toward it' (Cialdini 1988, p. 239).

It is important to note here that some related research has shown that people are more likely to overestimate the harmful effects on others, rather than underestimating harmful effects on themselves (see Cohen *et al.* 1988, Gunther 1991, Perloff 1993). Thus, in exhibiting the third-person perception, people are probably about right in estimating modest influences on themselves, but in error when they think others are more seriously affected.

This overestimation is important, for, to the extent that people are basing their opinions about censorship on their estimates of effects on others, their opinions are based on a false perception. Public opinion, so strongly in favor of television censorship in Singapore, may be inflated by the tendency toward a bias in the perceived difference between oneself and others—a bias that appears to be pervasive across media, across content areas, and across cultures.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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