This research note was first submitted to IJPOR January 27, 2005. The final version was received May 11, 2005.

1Studies have examined many effects of opinion polls on mass opinions and the political consequences. These effects are represented by labels such as bandwagon effect, underdog effect, hostile reaction, spiral of silence, hostile media, political activation, impersonal influence, and so on. Readers who wish to explore them are directed to representative writings on these topics (e.g. Ceci & Kain, 1982; Glynn et al., 1995; Gunther & Storey, 2003; Henshel & Johnston, 1987; Mutz, 1994, 1998; Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Some studies have examined the self–other gap in the effects of perceived public opinion (Glynn & Ostman, 1988; Mutz, 1989).
Given the empirical evidence on the public ambivalence toward perceived effects of news reports of polls and the public’s willingness to restrict media reports of poll results (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Lavrakas et al., 1991), we expect to find the same third-person perception, that is individuals perceiving greater effects of media messages on others than on self (Davison, 1983), that has been shown to be robust across diverse media messages, communication contexts, and even cultures.² We also expect to find the same pattern of the widening perceptual gap as target others are depicted in increasingly distant terms (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988).

However, ‘social distance’ remains an under-explicated construct (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; Perloff, 1993; Tewksbury, 2002). Based on the research on social categorization (e.g. Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Turner, 1985) and social comparison (Dunning & Hayes, 1996; Mussweiler, 2003), we argue that perceived similarity with each target other serves as an important heuristic guide for people to assess the potential impact of communication messages. Perceived similarity may moderate the self–other gap in perceived effects, leading to the following hypothesis:

\[ H_{1a} \]
As others are seen to be increasingly different from self, the self–other gap in perceived effects of opinion poll stories increases.

Further, because people often use ‘self’ as an anchor when assessing message effects on others (Dunning & Hayes, 1996), describing a target ‘other’ as being similar to ‘self’ would highlight self–other similarity (Mussweiler, 2003) and reduce the self–other gap in perceived message effect. Thus, we hypothesize:

\[ H_{1b} \]
The perceived-effect gap between ‘similar others’ and ‘different others’ is greater than that between ‘similar others’ and self.

If perceived similarity is a psychological basis of the social distance corollary, then, it can be cued with labels used to designate a target other (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). When the label of a target other cues similarity with the self on some dimension (such as belonging to the same socio-demographic group), then such perceived self–other similarity may lead to a reduced self–other gap in effect estimates despite the geographic distance. In our experiment involving university students as participants, we test this possibility by using labels of target others that designate either undergraduate students in public institutions, or not. This strategy allows us to test this hypothesis:

²The third-person effect is the phenomenon that a persuasive communication is seen as having the greatest impact ‘not on “me” or “you”, but on “them”—the third persons’ (Davison, 1983, p. 3). The perceptual component of this phenomenon is quite robust (see Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000, for a meta-analytical review), at least with regard to communication messages that are seen to have anti-social or socially undesirable effects. A few studies employing messages that are presumed to have socially desirable effects are shown to have greater perceived effects on self than on others, an empirical observation that has been termed the ‘first-person effect’ (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Gunther & Thorson, 1992) or ‘reversed third-person effect’ (David, Liu, & Myser, 2004). However, Paul et al.’s (2000) meta-analysis failed to find a significant moderating effect of perceived social desirability. Some studies also show that the self–other perceptual gap is related to support for more restrictions on the communication content in question (e.g. de Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Gunther, 1995; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997) and other communicative behaviors (e.g., Gunther & Storey, 2003).
The gap in perceived effects of opinion poll stories is larger between self and the others outside of the ‘university student’ category than between self and those within such a category, regardless of geographic distance.

Finally, we contend that, when people are asked to assess effects of media messages, they operate under the condition of insufficient information, or uncertainty (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Normatively speaking, when rendering their judgments on message effects, individuals must integrate two kinds of information: (1) how effective the message in question is in general and (2) how people in different categories differ in their orientation to the message. When the information on the overall effectiveness of the message is missing, individuals can only rely on the information on a target’s orientation to the message based on their lay theories of self–other differences summoned to mind by the label of the target other (Eveland et al., 1999; Furnham, 1988). If this is the case, we might ‘debias’ (Fischhoff, 1982; Engelmann & Strobel, 2000), so to speak, the effect estimates by supplying the necessary information.

To investigate this possibility, we employed as an experimental treatment the information that most research had found opinion polls to have little impact on the general public. We expect such information to cue individuals to reduce their effect estimates across target others:

Information on the research finding that opinion polls have little impact should reduce the magnitude of effect estimates.

If people integrate such information about the pattern in a general population when estimating the effects of opinion poll reports, they should reveal a reduced self–other gap in their effect estimates. Thus, we hypothesize:

Information on the research finding that opinion polls have little impact will reduce the self–other gap in perceived effects of opinion poll reports.

However, such information integration requires individuals to weigh the ‘scientific’ information supplied to them more heavily than their lay theories of self–other differences. Research has shown that this is an exceedingly difficult task and that egocentric reasoning is a very obstinate cognitive fallacy (Engelmann & Strobel, 2000; Krueger & Clement, 1994; also, David, Liu, & Myser, 2004). Therefore, we used different procedures in the two studies reported here to test H2b. In the survey study, trained interviewers verbally conveyed the information on the general ineffectiveness of opinion poll reports before the questions on effect estimates. In the laboratory experiment, the information was presented in a more explicit and salient fashion. It has been shown that, when such information is delivered ‘on a silver platter’ to those who are motivated to integrate it, it may help people to overcome their egocentric bias (Engelmann & Strobel, 2000).³

³It should be noted that the literature referred to in this paragraph deals with a different phenomenon: false consensus. While different judgmental tasks are involved in the third-person phenomenon, the same egocentric reasoning process is assumed to be involved.
METHOD

SURVEY STUDY

Undergraduate students enrolled in a communication research method class were trained to conduct telephone interviews with randomly selected adults in Dane County, Wisconsin, through a variant of the random-digit dialing method. The response rate, computed by following the AAPOR guideline (number of complete interviews divided by total number of contacts with known eligible respondents) was 39 percent, yielding 365 completed interviews.

Prior to the perceived-effect questions, respondents were asked a series of questions on how they viewed each of the two groups of people. One group was described as ‘people with the same background and political orientation as yours’ (to reduce verbosity, respondents were told that these were referred to as ‘your kind of people’). Another group was described as ‘people with background and political orientation very different from yours’ (referred to as ‘other kinds of people’). Respondents were asked to assess how similar (1 = not at all and 7 = very) each of the following groups of people was to ‘your kind of people’ or ‘other kinds of people’ respectively: people in your neighborhood, the average voter in the county, and the average voter in the country.

After that, the respondents were asked to assess how much (1 = very little and 7 = a great deal) each of the following groups would be affected by ‘opinion poll news’ reporting polls conducted after Bush’s 2003 State of the Union address: yourself, people in your neighborhood, the average voter in your county, the average voter in the country, ‘your kind of people,’ and ‘other kinds of people.’ Respondents were asked to evaluate the effects on each target person’s opinions about Bush’s tax-cut plan and willingness to express his/her opinion. The two items were averaged to form a perceived-effect index (alpha ranges from .62 to .72).

An experimental manipulation was incorporated in the survey by randomly assigning the respondents to be interviewed with one of the two forms of the questionnaire. After introducing media reports of opinion polls on Bush’s tax-cut plan, in Form A (53.2 percent), respondents were told ‘However, a series of scientific studies shows that news media reports of opinion polls have very little impact on voters.’ No such information was provided in Form B (46.8 percent).

LABORATORY EXPERIMENT

An experiment was conducted during the same period. Undergraduates enrolled in introductory communication courses at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the 2003 spring term participated in the experiment for extra course credit. In the two-week period, 186 participants completed the experiment.

The message stimulus was a fictitious news story attributed to The New York Times. The story was written in a way that conformed to a traditional opinion poll story for its

\[4\text{The question wording evokes two attributes, ‘background’ and ‘political orientation,’ causing the potential that each question involving each group so defined may be ‘double barreled.’ However, our question wording forced respondents to think about each group defined by both attributes as a single unit, setting a more stringent self–other contrast.}\]
Participants were asked to read the news story very carefully. Afterwards, they completed a series of third-person effect questions. The questions were parallel to those in the survey (alpha ranges from .72 to .76). However, ‘the average undergraduate student in this university’ and ‘the average undergraduate student from other Big Ten universities’ were used to replace ‘people in the neighborhood’ and ‘the average voter in the county.’

The experiment was conducted in small groups with 6 to 15 people in each session. All the sessions were run in the same sequence. Each participant was seated in front of a computer. Participants first followed the experimenter to practice data input by entering a pre-determined number representing the color of the sticker pasted on their computer monitor. Depending on the number inputted, participants were placed in the treatment or control condition randomly. The procedure placed 46.2 percent ($n=86$) of the participants in the treatment condition.

After everyone was comfortable with using the keyboard or mouse to answer questions, the news story reporting a poll allegedly conducted immediately after Bush’s 2003 State of the Union address appeared on the computer screen and the participants were instructed to read it very carefully. For the participants in the treatment condition, the screen before the news story displayed the following message:

Please be informed that a series of scientific studies has shown quite conclusively that media reports of opinion polls have no statistically significant impact in society. When evaluating the news story, please take this information into consideration.

After reading the article, participants completed a series of perceived effects questions. Finally, they were asked a set of open-ended questions about the stimulus and the practice at the beginning. No one doubted the authenticity of the fictitious New York Times article or detected the true function of the data-input practice.

RESULTS

SURVEY STUDY

Figure 1 shows the means of each condition across different target individuals. The left panel shows the means across targets identified with labels of increasing geographic distance traditionally used in third-person perception studies and the second panel shows the means across targets identified as similar or dissimilar others. The mean differences are tested using the multivariate criterion of Wilks’ lambda ($\lambda$) obtained via the general linear model (GLM) procedure.

The general third-person perception is observed by comparing the pooled means across targets. Two sets of self–other comparisons are made. Between self and the target others specified in geographic distance, the perceived effects increase significantly from the closest to the farthest others ($\lambda=.54$, $F[3, 362]=102.28$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta^2=.46$) and nearly all the increases are captured by a linear contrast. In addition, pairwise comparisons (via the Bonferroni test to adjust for multiple comparisons) show that each pair of

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5 The full text of the news story used is available from the lead author upon request.
the means is different significantly \((p < .001)\). The results thus far replicate the robust findings of the third-person perceptions.

When social distance is assessed in terms of dissimilarity in background and political orientations (the second panel in Figure 1), the same pattern was found \((\lambda = .62, F [3, 362] = 102.28, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .38)\). The result supports H1a. A paired t-test is conducted to compare the gap between self and the similar others \((/H9004 = .35)\) and the gap between the similar others and dissimilar others \((/H9004 = .47)\). The difference is in the predicted direction \((H1b)\) and marginally significant \((t = 1.88, p = .06)\).

To test mean differences between conditions, two repeated-measure analyses of variance with questionnaire form as the between-subject factor are conducted. When looking at the data on the others specified in terms of geographic distance, a significant reduction in the estimated effects by the information on ineffectiveness of poll reports is found \((F [1, 363] = 3.81, p = .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01)\). However, there is no evidence of the significant interaction predicted in H2b. When the others were specified in terms of specific similarities or dissimilarities, again, the means were reduced by the treatment information, but not significantly \((F [1, 363] = 1.43, p = .23)\). There is no evidence of the significant interaction predicted in H2b here either. Overall, the survey data provide some limited support for H2a but no support for H2b.

**Laboratory Experiment**

In the experiment, the hypotheses are tested with similar analytical procedures. The means across different target individuals are shown in Figure 2.

Comparing the pooled means across the targets shows significantly larger presumed effects on others than on self \((\lambda = .63, F [3, 183] = 35.52, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .37)\). However,
the self–other gap does not increase linearly with increased geographic distance. Pairwise comparison reveals no significant difference between undergraduate students in participants’ own university and those in the other Big Ten universities. The evidence clearly supports H\textsubscript{1c}, suggesting that the label of ‘undergraduate students’ cued perceived similarities among those who were geographically distant and belonged to different institutions. This interpretation is further supported by a more detailed analysis in which the effect gap ($\Delta = .27$) between self and the average of all undergraduate students is found to be significantly smaller than the gap ($\Delta = .47$) between the average undergraduate students and the average voter in the country ($t = 2.21$, $p < .05$). The evidence lends further support for H\textsubscript{1b}.

Comparing the means between conditions shown in Figure 2 shows a significant reduction in effect estimates by the information treatment ($F[1,184] = 11.24$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$). However, even with this salient information treatment, no significant interaction predicted in H\textsubscript{2b} is found.

**CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Our goal in conducting these studies on the perceived effects of media reports of opinion polls was to explore an area where public opinion and communication converge. The results show that the perceived effects of media reports of polls reveal the same pattern of the third-person perception found with other kinds of communication messages. The self–other gap is based on seeing others to be dissimilar to self (H\textsubscript{1a–H1c}). While information on the general ineffectiveness of opinion poll reports, if presented saliently, may reduce effect estimates (H\textsubscript{2a}), it is unlikely to narrow the self–other perceptual gap (H\textsubscript{2b}).
Despite several limitations (i.e. local sample, experiment with undergraduate participants, and a single-issue focus) of our studies, the findings contribute to our understanding of both the third-person effect phenomenon and public opinion processes. While a number of previous studies on the third-person perception used media messages with presumed socially undesirable influences, we have extended the phenomenon to the public’s perceptions of news stories on opinion polls reporting presumably ‘scientific’ data. The ‘scientificness’ of opinion polling may not get translated into the public’s unbiased perceptions of the effects of media poll reports. It is useful to know this empirically for two intertwined reasons. First, the worries about undesired effects of media reports of polls by policy makers, political strategists, and citizens are often grounded in these people’s perceptions of greater effects on others. And second, these perceptions are not free from individuals’ egocentric reasoning that may take place quite automatically and is very difficult to overcome (Krueger & Clement, 1994).

Perceiving varying effects of opinion polls thus has implications beyond the third-person effects research. One is related to the fact that laypersons do not have a sufficient understanding of survey methodology and the logic of statistical representation of mass opinions. They may react negatively to polls and estimate effects of poll reports without differentiating those properly conducted from those badly done. Nor would they differentiate bad reports of polls from polling as a democratic institution (Taylor, 2002). If they predicate their actions on perceived effects of opinion polls, such actions might be led astray (e.g. supporting restrictions on polls, refusing to participate in legitimate polls and surveys). The other implication is that acting on perceived effects of poll reports may be an integral element of democratic politics. Understanding how the self–other gap in perceived effects of poll reports occurs helps us understand the calculus of political actors, who often decide to donate money, broadcast political ads, spin poll results, and so on based on their perceptions of the effects of poll reports on others. Such perceptions and the actions based on them shape the dynamics of political campaigns (Bartels, 1988; Mutz, 1995). Clearly, how the perceived effects of poll reports are formed needs to be an integral part of our assessments of the influence of opinion polls in the public opinion process.

REFERENCES


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

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