

THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

Banu BAYBARS HAWKS*

Üçüncü Kişi Etkisi

Üçüncü kişi etkisi, iletişim alanındaki yeni araştırma konularından biridir. Bu konuda yapılan çalışmalar, bu hipotezin açıklanmasında hangi faktörlerin ne gibi roller oynadığını ölçmeye çalışmaktadır. Sosyolog W. Phillips Davison "Üçüncü Kişi Etkisi Teorisi"ni 1983 yılında ilk kez ortaya atan kişidir. Davison'a göre, insanlar, kendileri dışındaki üçüncü kişilerin medyanın verdiği mesajlara karşı daha duyarlı olduğunu ve bunlardan daha fazla etkilendiklerini düşünürler. Kişilerin başkaları üzerinde algıladıkları bu etki ile kendileri üzerinde algıladıkları etki arasındaki farka da "üçüncü kişi etkisi" adı verilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Kitle iletişim araçları mesajları, üçüncü kişiler, etki.

.....

* Araş.Gör.Dr., İstanbul Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Halkla İlişkiler ve Tanıtım Bölümü

Third-person effect is a relatively new phenomenon in communication studies, and research about it continues to be able to assess the role of various factors in the explanation of this hypothesis.

Sociologist W. Phillips Davison (1983) is the originator of the third-person effect hypothesis. According to him, there is a tendency for people to think that others are more influenced by mass media messages than they are themselves. This discrepancy between the perceived effect on others and the perceived effect on oneself is called the "third-person effect." In a 1983 *Public Opinion Quarterly* article, Davison first coined the term the "third-person effect" and argued that the amount of a message's effect attributed to others was an overestimation (Davison 1983: 1-15).

In this founding article, Davison used an example of a U.S. held island in the South Pacific during World War II. Japanese dropped leaflets to this island, which intended for African-American soldiers to encourage them to desert their troops. At the end, it appeared that the leaflets did not affect the African-American soldiers, who recognized propaganda when they saw it. Instead, the leaflets affected the white commander, who overestimated the message's impact and pulled the African-Americans off the island (Davison 1983: 1-15). This result led Davison to originate third-person effect hypothesis.

Third-person effect has two components (Gunther 1995:27):

1. The perceptual hypothesis: People are prone to a perceptual bias, leading them to estimate that mass media messages will

have greater influence on others than they will have on themselves.

2. The behavioral hypothesis: People who exhibit third-person effect will be more likely to support restrictions on the media's messages. People think that they are less vulnerable to harmful influences of the media. So, their support for restrictions on the media can be rooted in their concern about media's undesired influences on others. Researchers like McLeod (1997), Rojas et al. (1996), and Salwen (1998) reported this tendency of the people.

There are two inclinations of people that might underlie the discrepancy between perceived impact of the media on oneself and perceived impact on others (Price 1997: 527):

- Overestimation of Impact on Others: People believe that others are more gullible and susceptible to media's negative influences than they see themselves to be.
- Underestimation of Impact on the Self: People see themselves in a better position to judge the effects of the media. Trying to reinforce their self-esteem and positive self-images, they believe that they are more intelligent or better off than most others, which lead them to estimate that they are less vulnerable to media's undesired influences. This tendency is also called "biased optimism."

Third-person effect can have great consequences on society in many areas. The greater the negative effect of the media seen in others, the more the people are likely to believe something should be done about it in order to protect the society, leading them to support restrictions on the media. The likelihood of

supporting the restrictions will be greater when the size of difference between the perceived impact on the self and perceived impact on others gets larger.

Some researchers explained their concern for the potentially harmful impacts of the third-person effect on some areas, including freedom of speech, decision-making and public policy. For example, in libel cases, if the third-person effect is present in the jury, they can overestimate the effect of the libel on others. This results in a pattern of overcompensating the amount of damages awarded (Mason 1995: 610-20). Some other researchers argued that the presence of third-person effect could also influence the outcome of elections and decision-making process. Mutz claimed that campaign managers perceive media coverage as highly influential in persuading others, even it is not the case. But since people think that the media content influences the public, the third-person effect has a great impact on elections (Mutz 1989: 3-23). Consequently, overestimating the impact of the media on others can result in a poor decision making and poor public policy.

While the research about the third-person effect is not very extensive since it is quite a new phenomenon in the field, studies have been done to build relationships between the third-person effect and some variables such as the message, message receiver, media schemas and media use orientations.

Researchers who focused on the message found that greater issue salience (Mutz 1989) and negative media messages (Gunther and Thorson 1992) are more likely to create a greater third-person effect. Cohen et al. (1988) showed that third-person

effects were magnified when the source of the message in question was overtly biased its subject. People think that they are smart enough to find out this bias, while they think others can't (Cohen v.d. 1998: 161-73). Gunther and Thorson (1992) revealed that higher emotional intensity of the message creates a greater reverse third person effect, which means people perceive themselves as being more affected by the media than others. Their findings also indicated that non-emotional messages created a third-person effect.

Some other researchers have focused on message receivers. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper , with the intention of examining the role of individual characteristics on third-person effect, showed the same television coverage of the war in Lebanon to pro-Arab, pro-Israeli, and neutral viewers. At the end, they found that those who are more involved in a topic seem more likely to exhibit the phenomenon (Vallone v.d. 1985: 577-88). Lasorsa found that those who perceived themselves as experts on the subject exhibited third-person effect (Lasorsa 1989: 373-78). Some researchers showed partisanship, age, and education of message receivers as other strong variables in the third-person effect research. It was found that people who were strong partisans, who were older and those with higher education had more of a third-person effect, since they saw themselves as less influenced by media messages (Tiedge v.d. 141-53).

Media schema features and media use orientations were also showed by researchers as important variables, which can predict the magnitude of third-person effects. In a study done by Price and his colleagues, it was found that media schema features

– the belief about media’s power to persuade, the belief about the news is biased, and the belief about people are vulnerable to media’s persuasive messages – produced third-person effects. They also found that people who used the media for surveillance exhibited smaller third-person effects, while those who use the media for entertainment showed greater third-person effects (Price v.d. 1997: 525-40).

In regard to behavioral consequences of the third-person effect, researchers found positive relationships between perceived impact of the media on others and support for censorship. People saw others as more adversely affected by pornography and TV violence, and their societal concern led them to support restrictions on pornography and television violence (Gunther 27; Hoffner v.d. 1999: 726-42). Third-person effect researchers have claimed that while media messages can have great effects on society, these effects are not the direct results of a persuasive message alone. In third-person effect hypothesis, people receive a message and the persuasion partly depends on how much people believe other people are affected by the message. Under this context, subconscious peer pressure can be seen as an important factor in how people process a message (Perloff 1989: 236-62).

Conclusion: The third-person effect is a relatively new phenomenon in communication studies, and the research about it is too scant to call it a theory. However, studies to date have given a considerable empirical support to accept it as a strong hypothesis. Especially the perceptual part of the hypothesis is universally accepted. Perloff (1996) reported that 15 of 16 studies

done about the third-person effect were consistent with this hypothesis.

Third-person effect can have direct impacts on individuals and society as a whole. Sometimes, these impacts can be harmful. Therefore, more research is needed to find out what causes the third-person effect in order to assess its dangers and to make suggestions in regard to how to limit its harmful impacts.

References:

- COHEN, Jeremy; MUTZ, Diana; Price, Vincent; & Gunther, Albert (1998). "Perceived impact of defamation: An experiment on third-person effects," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Sayı:52: 161-173.
- DAVISON, W. Phillips (1983). "The third-person effect in communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Sayı: 47(1): 1-15.
- GUNTHER, Albert C. (1995). "Overrating the X-rating: The third-person perception and support for censorship of pornography," *Journal of Communication*, Sayı: 45(1): 27.
- GUNTHER, Albert C. ve Thorson, Esther (1992). "Perceived persuasive effects of product commercials and public service announcements: Third-person effects in new domains," *Communication Research*, Sayı: 19(5): 574-596.
- HOFFNER, Cynthia; BUCHANAN, Martha; ANDERSON Joel David, & HUBBS, Lisa A. (1999). "Support for censorship of television violence: The role of the third-person effect and news exposure," *Communication Research*, Sayı: 26(6): 726-742.
- LASORSA, Dominic L. (1989). "Real and perceived effects of 'America'" *Journalism Quarterly*, Sayı: 66(2): 373-378.

- MASON, Laurie (1995). "Newspaper as repeater: An experiment on defamation and the third-person effect," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Sayı: 72(3): 610-620.
- MUTZ, Diane C. (1989). "The influence of perceptions of media influence: Third-person effects and the public expression of opinions," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Sayı: 1(1): 3-23.
- PERLOFF, Richard M., "Ego involvement and the third-person effect of televised news coverage," *Communication Research*, Sayı: 16(2): 236-262.
- PRICE, Vincent; Huang, Li-Ning, & Tewksbury, David (1997). "Third-person effects of news coverage: Orientations toward media," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Sayı: 74(3): 527.
- TIEDGE, James, T.; SILVERBLATT, Arthur; HAVICE, Michael; ROSENFELD, Richard, "Discrepancy between perceived first-person and perceived third-person mass media effects," *Journalism Quarterly*, Sayı: 68(1-2): 141-153.
- VALLONE, Robert P.; ROSS, Lee; & LEPPER, Mark R. (1985). "The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perceptions and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut Massacre," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Sayı: 49: 577-88.