**Introduction**

- James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, proposed eleven arguments against same-sex marriage. The first and central argument states that “the legalization of homosexual marriage will quickly destroy the traditional family” (Dobson, 2004).
- We suspect that Dobson is not making these claims based on introspection. That is, Dobson has not claimed that his sexual identity or sexual purity has been or would be affected by the specter of same-sex marriage. Rather, Dobson seems to be claiming that allowing same-sex marriage would affect the sexual identities of others.
- This reasoning is similar to that of the Third-Person Effect (TPE; Davison, 1983).
- The third-person effect refers to the belief that others are more influenced by the media than oneself is.
- We predicted that participants would not indicate that they would be influenced by same-sex marriage but would indicate that other people would be more influenced than they would be.
- This effect would be more pronounced for dissimilar others (Massachusetts residents, where same-sex marriage is legal) than for more similar others (people in general).
- We also predicted that political party affiliation, as well as religious fundamentalism and right wing authoritarianism would be significant predictors of the third-person effect.

**Method**

**Design**
- This is a within-participants design, with who the participants are considering (self, Massachusetts residents, and others in general) as the within-participants factor.

**Participants**
- 39 males, 96 females, all heterosexual

**Measures**
- Three 10-item measures to assess impact of allowing same-sex marriage on themselves, Massachusetts residents, and others in general
- Measure of political beliefs
- The Religious Fundamentalism scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004)
- The Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale (Altemeyer, 2006, 20-item version)

**Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support for banning SSM</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.817</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican party support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.844</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of SSM on self</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.902</td>
<td>-3.31</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of SSM on others</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.946</td>
<td>-1.28</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of SSM on Massachusetts</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.903</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.84</td>
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<tr>
<td>RWA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.925</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>1.63</td>
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<td>Third person effect</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

- There is clear support for the Third-Person Effect in people’s attitudes about the effect of allowing same-sex marriage:
- Participants thought allowing same-sex marriage would affect others more than themselves.
- Right-Wing Authoritarianism was the best predictor of both participants’ attitudes toward same-sex marriage and the Third-Person Effect.
- Participants’ attitudes toward same-sex marriage were more moderate overall.

**Conclusion**

- Everyone displayed the third-person effect, and this is a logical impossibility; everyone can not rightly believe that everyone else would be more influenced than they would be themselves.
- Therefore, our results do not support Dobson’s primary rationale (first on his list of rationales) for opposing same-sex marriage, that allowing same-sex marriage would negatively impact heterosexual marriage.
- We believe, although our data do not speak to this position, that Dobson’s and others’ claims are a smoke screen obscuring their prejudice towards homosexuals.
- The third-person effect compliments the literature on people’s perceptions of others’ bias and vulnerability to influence (Prin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). Combining these two lines of research, a picture emerges of the individual as confident about her or his ability to resist the influence of bias, but skeptical of others abilities to do the same. Perhaps getting people to extend to others the benefit of the doubt they themselves enjoy would lead to more grace and less division.

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**Not my marriage: The (il)logic of the third-person effect applied to same-sex marriage**

Matthew P. Winslow  
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