

Not My Marriage

Third-Person Perception and the Effects of Legalizing Same-Sex Marriage

Matthew P. Winslow¹ and Rexéna Napier²

¹Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY, USA, ²University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA

Abstract. Third-person perception (TPP) refers to the belief that others are more influenced by the media than you yourself are. This theory was extended to people's perceptions of the effects of legalizing same-sex marriage (SSM). It was predicted that people might believe that legalizing SSM would affect others' marriages, but not their own. It was also predicted that high right-wing authoritarians (RWAs) would display TPP more than low RWAs. Participants (135 undergraduate heterosexual students) estimated the effect of legalizing SSM on their own as well as other people's attitudes about marriage and sexuality. Results indicated that participants displayed TPP. The hypothesis about a link between RWA and TPP was supported. Implications of these findings and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: right-wing authoritarianism, third-person effect, third-person perception, same-sex marriage

The proposition of same-sex marriage (SSM) has led to arguments both in favor of and in opposition to its legalization. Opponents of legalizing SSM allege that allowing same-sex couples to marry would damage traditional marriage. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, proposed eleven arguments against SSM. According to Dobson (2004), for example, legalizing SSM would destroy the traditional family by altering sexual identities (presumably of heterosexuals), understanding of commitment, and views of "sexual purity." While the veracity of these claims is beyond the scope of the current investigation, one suspects 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 SSM. Rather, Dobson seems to be claiming that allowing SSM would affect the sexual identities of *others*. If Dobson is secure in his sexuality in the face of the threat from SSM, he is less sanguine about the ability of others to resist the proposed damaging impact of legalized SSM.

Research demonstrates a similar asymmetric belief about vulnerability to influence. Third-person perception (TPP; Davison, 1983; McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001; Peiser & Peter, 2001) refers to the belief that others are more influenced by the media than is oneself. Following Davison's (1983) somewhat casual demonstration of TPP, other researchers explored the topic with considerable energy. In their meta-analysis of 32 published and unpublished articles that examined TPP, Paul, Salwen, and Dupagne (2000) concluded that the effect size of the differ-

ence between estimated media effects on self and others was $r = .50$, which qualifies as a moderate to strong effect.

Several explanations for TPP have been explored, including self-enhancement (a positive view of self requires the denial of influence by the media; Perloff, 1999), attributional biases (others are gullible but context and information matters to self; Gunther, 1991), and self-categorization (TPP is enhanced when social identity is salient and others are members of the outgroup, and the communication is seen as normative for each group; Reid & Hogg, 2005). We take no position on the relative merits of each explanation. As Reid and Hogg suggest, all three explanations seem to work equally well to explain presumed negative effects of the media.

The role of individual differences in TPP has received modest empirical attention. Factors such as age (Peiser & Peter, 2001), media orientation (Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997), collectivism (Lee & Tamborini, 2005), ego-involvement (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995), and self-monitoring (Tal-Or & Drukman, 2010) have been examined. We propose that right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1998; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Bäckström & Björklund, 2007; see especially Stones, 2006, for relevant antigay research) might affect TPP. RWA has three components: authoritarian submission, aggression against outgroups, and conventionalism (Altemeyer). People high in RWA (henceforth "high RWAs") react negatively (sometimes violently) to any threat to the social order (Cohrs & Asbrock, 2008) and are thus likely strong opponents of SSM. High RWAs are also narcissistic (Hyman, 2009) and

may think of themselves as better than others. TPP is partially based on seeing others as more susceptible to influence than themselves (Peiser & Peter, 2001), especially when that influence is not normative. Narcissistic high RWAs most likely see themselves as less prone to influence than less narcissistic people low in RWA (henceforth “low RWAs”). Thus, they are likely to display greater TPP.

The Current Research

The current research extends the reasoning of TPP to the topic of SSM for the first time. Opposition to public policy has not previously been explored as a consequence of TPP. We predicted that participants will indicate that they would not be personally influenced by legalized SSM. We also predicted that participants would indicate that other people would be more influenced than they themselves. No previous research has examined the role of RWA or political party affiliation in TPP. We predicted that RWA would be positively related to TPP in this social context. Based on previous research showing a strong correlation between RWA and conservatism (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), we also explored the relationship between political party preference and TPP, predicting that Republicanism would be associated with TPP.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate psychology students enrolled at Eastern Kentucky University. The sample included both males ($n = 43$) and females ($n = 112$). Participants' self-identified political party preferences were 37% Democratic, 50% Republican, and 12% other. After excluding married participants ($n = 12$), nonheterosexual participants ($n = 4$), and participants who chose “other” for political party ($n = 19$), the sample included 34 males and 86 females with a mean age of 19.29 ($SD = 2.2$).

Materials

The participants completed a 12-page questionnaire (see Table 1 for scale reliabilities). The first section started with a brief description of the SSM issue, mentioning both sides of the issue and not endorsing either side. Two items asked about participants' attitudes about legalizing SSM. The items were rated on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10, with one reverse-scored item so that higher numbers indicate more opposition to allowing SSM.

The second section contained two parallel scales to measure the participants' perception of the effect that SSM would have on themselves and other people. The first ten

items asked participants to consider the effects of SSM on themselves personally (see Appendix for items based on Dobson's claims). The next set of items mirrored the first and asked participants to estimate the effects of SSM on others. Each scale included 10 items ranging from -4 (*strongly disagree*) to $+4$ (*strongly agree*) to maintain consistency with subsequent scales.

Participants' political preferences were measured using both a categorical measure and continuous measures. The categorical item asked which political party they identified with, Democratic Party, Republican Party, or other. The two continuous measures asked how much they would consider themselves a supporter of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, both items on a 9-point scale from *not at all* to *very much so*. The Democratic Party support item was reverse-scored and the two items were combined to form a single measure of political party preference.

The next section, containing Altemeyer's (2006) 20-item RWA scale, was set up in the same fashion, ranging from -4 (*very strongly disagree*) to $+4$ (*very strongly agree*). Ten items were reverse-scored so that higher numbers indicated more authoritarianism (see Table 1 for scale properties).

Finally, a biographical information questionnaire included questions about participants' race, age, sex, marital status, and sexual orientation.

Table 1. Scale properties

Variable	No. items	α	M	SD
Attitudes about SSM ^a	2	.817	5.49	2.99
Political party affiliation ^b	2	.844	5.43	2.50
Effect of legalization of SSM on self ^c	10	.902	-3.31	1.22
Effect of legalization of SSM on others ^c	10	.946	-1.28	2.11
RWA ^c	20	.925	-0.05	1.63
Third-person perception	-	-	2.03	1.89

Notes. $n = 120$. ^aNine-point scale, from 1 to 9, higher numbers indicate rejection of SSM. ^bNine-point scale, from 1 to 9, higher numbers indicate more support for the Republican Party. ^cNine-point scale, from -4 to $+4$. RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

Procedure

Data were collected in groups of 1–15. Participants were first given a consent statement explaining that their participation in the study was voluntary and ensuring anonymity. Consent was assumed if participants completed the study. All participants completed all measures, making this a within-participants design (Price & Tewksbury, 1996, obtained TPP using both within- and between-participants designs).

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive information about the scales. The means indicate moderate rejection of legalizing SSM and moderate political views. Participants scored near the midpoint on RWA.

Attitudes about SSM

To explore participants' attitudes about SSM, a simultaneous regression analysis was conducted with sex¹, support for the Republican Party, and RWA as predictors, $F(3, 120) = 48.81, p < .001, R^2 = .558$. RWA was a significant predictor ($\beta = .661, p < .001$) of participants' attitudes about SSM (indicating opposition to legalization) while support for the Republican Party was a marginally significant predictor ($\beta = .135, p = .057$), and sex was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -.055, p = .388$; see Table 2 for scale inter-correlations).

Table 2. Intercorrelations between scales

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attitudes about SSM	–	.439***	-.213*	.736***	.265**
2. Republican Party support		–	-.006	.460***	.126
3. Gender			–	-.237**	-.041
4. RWA				–	.337***
5. Third person effect					–

Notes. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

Third-Person Perception

Participants did not believe that legalizing SSM would affect their own relationships or attitudes. Although there was most likely a floor effect ($M = -3.31$, scale low end point -5), participants thought that legalizing SSM would affect others relatively more ($M = -1.28$) than it would affect themselves, $F(1, 135) = 138.8, p < .001$. However, it is important to note that both means were below the scale midpoint.

A measure of TPP was calculated by subtracting participants' averaged scores on the perception of the influence of SSM on others items from participants' averaged scores on the perception of the influence of SSM on the self items, so that higher numbers indicated larger TPP (see Table 1 for scale properties and Table 2 for correlations with other scales). Overall, RWA and TPP were significantly correlat-

ed, $r = .337, p < .001$, as predicted. A simultaneous regression was conducted on this new variable with support for the Republican Party, support for banning SSM, and RWA as predictors, $F(3, 120) = 5.046, p < .003, R^2 = .093$. Support for the Republican Party and support for banning SSM were not significant predictors of TPP ($\beta_s = -.042, .047$; p 's = .674, .721, respectively), but RWA was ($\beta = .322, p = .017$). To further explore participants' views on the effect of SSM on self versus others, regressions were conducted separately on these measures. Looking at the perceived influence of SSM on the self, RWA was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -.090, p = .472$), while support for the Republican Party and support for banning SSM were significant ($\beta_s = .333, .292$; p s = .001, .019, respectively). However, all three variables were marginally significant predictors of perceived influence of SSM on others ($\beta_s = .155, .211, .235$; p s = .092, .081, .055 for support for the Republican Party, support for banning SSM, and RWA, respectively). It appears that participants' political beliefs and their position on legalizing SSM affected their perceptions of the effect of SSM on themselves (both in a positive direction), while none of the predictors was strongly related to their perceptions of the effect of SSM on others. Only when the critical calculation of subtracting the perceived influence on others from perceived influence on self (the operational definition of TPP in the current research) is made does the affect of RWA become apparent.

Discussion

Our research advances the understanding of TPP in two ways: We extended TPP into the public policy realm by demonstrating pervasive TPP about legalizing SSM, and we demonstrated that a heretofore unexplored individual difference variable – RWA – affects TPP. We hypothesized that participants would predict that allowing SSM would affect other people's attitudes, behaviors, and relationships more than it would affect their own, similar to the third-person effect (Davison, 1983). The data clearly support the hypothesis. Participants rather vehemently denied that allowing SSM would affect themselves, with an average composite score near the floor of the scale. While participants did not predict that allowing SSM would affect others *much*, they did predict it would affect others *more* than it would affect themselves.

We predicted and found a positive relationship between RWA and TPP. Importantly, RWA was not related to either participants' perceptions of the effect of SSM on self or others, but only TPP. It could be that the narcissism of high RWAs (Hyman, 2009) leads them to believe that others would be more influenced by SSM than they are. These

¹ Sex was not a significant predictor in any analysis, nor did including or excluding it affect the patterns of results. Thus, it will not be discussed here further.

results are consistent with research indicating that high RWAs hold prejudiced views toward many minorities (Altemeyer, 1998; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Bäckström & Björklund, 2007; Stones, 2006). Thus, it appears that not only are high RWAs prejudiced against homosexuals (and against legalizing SSM), but they also display TPP more than do low RWAs. To be fair, high RWAs might really be less vulnerable to any effect of legalizing SSM than are low RWAs. It is hard to imagine high RWAs divorcing their opposite-sex husband or wife to marry a same-sex partner given their pervasive antigay prejudice. However, while high RWAs displayed a stronger TPP, low RWAs still displayed a (somewhat) weaker TPP.²

Data from the current study can be used to distinguish between two explanations for the relationship between RWA and TPP³. RWA could be directly related to TPP, suggesting that RWA would lead people to display TPP in a variety of contexts; or the RWA-TPP relationship could be mediated by high RWAs opposition to SSM. We performed an indirect effects analysis following the bootstrapping approach described by Preacher and Hayes (2008) with support for banning SSM as the potential mediator between RWA and TPP. However, support for banning SSM was not a significant mediator of the RWA-TPP relationship, $Z = .296$, $p = .768$, $CI(95) = -.188, .253$. This supports the direct-link rather than the indirect effect explanation. Future research should examine the RWA-TPP link in other contexts.

Claims of opponents of SSM about the dangers of SSM for heterosexual marriage may be a smoke screen obscuring their prejudice toward homosexuals. This would function in a manner similar to the use of nonracist explanations by modern or aversive racists to obscure their racist attitudes (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977; Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2010). For example, Hodson, Dovidio, and Gaertner (2002) found that high-prejudiced college students discriminated against a Black college applicant only when the applicant's qualifications were ambiguous, providing the college students with a nonracial justification for their discrimination. Crandall, Eshleman, and O'Brien (2002) propose that the expression (or suppression) of prejudice is largely a matter of what is normatively acceptable. Their list of 105 targets of prejudice did not include gay people seeking to marry, but gay soldiers and homosexuals who raise children were rated as between *maybe OK* and *not OK to feel negatively toward*. If gay people seeking to marry are seen as a group at best (or worst) *maybe OK* to feel negatively toward then expression of this negative feeling, when present, would violate the norms in society and thus require some more indirect expression. While it is still slightly more socially acceptable to hold blatantly prejudiced views about homosexuals than other groups, having a

nonprejudiced rationale for discrimination would protect opponents of SSM from the imputation of prejudice (Winslow, 2004).

Our data also speak to college-aged participants' attitudes about SSM. While national opinion polls (see ReligiousTolerance.org, 2007, for a summary) and several state ballot initiatives indicate a lack of support for legalizing SSM in the general US population, our sample was more favorable to the idea. In our sample, 51.7% fell below the midpoint of the scale measuring some level of support for banning SSM, while 44.2% fell above the midpoint. The more favorable position of this young sample fits with public opinion polls that show more support among young Americans (ReligiousTolerance.org, 2007). Perhaps the potential legalization of SSM is a function of these young people becoming a larger proportion of the voting population (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991).

The existence of the discrepancy between participants' ratings of the effects of SSM on themselves and others suggests two possible explanations: Participants could be correct in their self-assessments but overly cynical about others; or they could be overly optimistic in their self-assessments but accurate in the assessments of others. While our data do not allow for a disentangling of these two explanations, research by Douglas and Sutton (2004, 2008) suggests the latter explanation is more likely. They found that participants accurately perceived how much others were affected by persuasive messages, but consistently underestimated how influenced they were by the same messages. Applied to the current research, Douglas and Sutton's findings suggest that our participants might be more affected by legalized SSM than they predict. To help resolve this question, future researchers could attempt to measure the actual and perceived effect of legalized SSM on those citizens residing where SSM is legal.

This research clearly has limitations. First, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, as does the nature of the sample (college students, geographical location). Second, the study is correlational and thus cannot speak to the causal relationships between the variables examined. These findings need to be replicated with more diverse populations and methods.

This research complements the literature on people's perceptions of others' bias and vulnerability to influence (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). Combining these two lines of research, a picture emerges of individuals as confident about their 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.

² Dividing the sample into three equal groups based on RWA, the TPP score of the lowest RWA group was only 1.48, while that of the highest group was 2.90.

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Matthew P. Winslow

Eastern Kentucky University
127 Cammack, 521 Lancaster Ave.
Richmond, KY 40475
USA
E-mail Matthew.Winslow@eku.edu

Appendix

All items responded to on a –4 to +4 scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

1. Allowing same-sex marriage would have a negative influence on my future marriage.
2. Allowing same-sex marriage would make me more likely to live with my boyfriend/girlfriend without getting married in the future.
3. Allowing same-sex marriage would make me less likely to ever get married in the future.
4. Allowing same-sex marriage would make me more likely to get divorced in the future.
5. Allowing same-sex marriage would confuse me about my sexual identity.
6. Allowing same-sex marriage would make me less likely to have lifelong commitments.
7. Allowing same-sex marriage would make me less likely to emotionally bond with my partner.
8. Allowing same-sex marriage would make me more likely to have premarital sex.
9. Allowing same-sex marriage would make me more likely to have an extramarital affair.
10. Allowing same-sex marriage would make me more likely to engage in polygamy (multiple wives) or polyandry (multiple husbands).