



## Perceptions of Self and the "Other": An Analysis of Challenges to *And Tango Makes Three*

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### Abstract

*Understanding what motivates people to challenge books and how community members react to these challenges can help librarians find better ways to work with challengers to come to equitable solutions. This study focused on the motives behind challenges to the acclaimed children's book *And Tango Makes Three* and the reasoning given by those who opposed these challenges. Qualitative content analysis was done on newspaper and library journal articles that discussed challenges to the book. Analysis revealed five major themes: third-person effect, parental rights, scarcity, First Amendment rights, and diversity.*

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand the motives for and arguments against book challenges. Between 2001 and 2010 the American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) recorded 4,659 book challenges (ALA 2011a). A great many of these challenges occur at schools and libraries. By studying the discourse of a community during book challenges, librarians can better understand what motivates people to challenge books and find effective ways to work with challengers to achieve acceptable solutions. This study focused on the motives behind challenges to the acclaimed children's book *And Tango Makes Three* and the reasoning given by those in the community who opposed these challenges.

### Literature Review

Because motives for censorship have been studied across disciplines, censorship attitudes have been defined and researched in various ways. Past studies have viewed censorship attitudes from both an individual level as well as part of the larger construct of political tolerance (Lambe 2002). This study focused on censorship attitudes as they related to a specific controversy. The concepts of third-person effect, scarcity, and First Amendment rights were used to help focus the research to better understand the attitudes and motives behind those who challenge controversial books and those to fight censorship.

## Third-Person Effect

Third-person effect is a framework for studying censorship attitudes (Lambe 2002). Coined by Davison (1983), third-person effect hypothesizes that when exposed to a controversial media message, a person will overestimate the amount of influence that message will have over other people. While not limited to the study of mass communication, third-person effect has been used to study various types of media content. Past research topics include Internet pornography (Byoungkwan and Tamborini 2005), political attack ads (Ran and Ven-Hwei 2007), public service announcements (White and Dillon 2000), rap lyrics (McLeod and Eveland 1997), and violence on television (Hoffner and Buchanan 2002). These studies, and the hundreds of others that have been written in the past 25 years, used experimental research and survey methods in an attempt to further understand third-person effect and its broader implications for media perception and influence.

One factor that can influence the level of third-person effect is media content. For example, while many studies have found that people believe they are less influenced by negative media messages than others, White and Dillon's (2000) study of public service announcements found that people also think they are more likely to be persuaded by a positive media message than others. Therefore the desirability of a message has an impact on both the way people view their own level of persuasion and the way people view the level of persuasion the message has over others.

In relation to censorship, media content can affect the severity of restrictions given to various types of media content. This could be attributed to several factors, including reasons for the censorship (political vs. moral), content source (news vs. entertainment), and the type of media (books vs. television) (McLeod, Lambe, and Paek 2005). All of these factors can influence access restrictions based on age (Internet filter devices), location (in the library stacks vs. behind the counter), and time of day (mature programming after 9 p.m.).

Another factor that can influence the level of third-person effect is the characteristics of "other." A deeper definition of third-person effect reveals that when one is evaluating the effects of a message the "impact will not be on 'me' or 'you,' but on 'them'—the third person" (Davison 1983, 3). In fact, the third person is perceived to be even more influenced by a message the more a person's characteristics differ from those of the self (Lambe and McLeod 2005). Characteristics include age, gender, education, income, media use, and ideology (McLeod, Lambe, and Paek 2005). A difference in age could explain why children are especially prone to the category of "other." For example, a parent might explain that while their child is not influenced by a specific type of media because of the parent's censoring of material to the child, other children whose parents either didn't censor the material or aren't aware of it will be negatively influenced.

## Scarcity

Another dimension of challenged and censored books is the lure of scarcity. In economics, scarcity is a condition of demand exceeding supply. However, while an economist is interested in the monetary value of an object, for censorship, scarcity affects its social value. Sellers of limited-edition coins, limited-time offers, and "while supplies last" deals have long understood that the allure of an object increases as perceived availability decreases.

The censorship of books can also produce the effects of scarcity. Salomon Rushdie's *Satanic Versus* and Mian Mian's *Candy* saw a boom in sales after the books were banned in certain countries (Pratkinis and Aronson 2001). Some of the most loved and popular books of all time have been challenged or banned, including *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, *Catch-22*, *Gone with the Wind*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Sova 1998). A classic like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is as much known for its controversies as it is for its plotline.

The appeal of scarcity is not limited to readers. Toni Morrison, author of *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, two of the most frequently banned books in the United States, once said in an article that, "There are so many great books on the banned lists, I'd be almost embarrassed if mine weren't on them!" (Chen 2007, 262). Pat Conroy, author of *Beach Music* and *The Prince of Tides*, which were both banned from two West Virginia high school classrooms, wrote a letter to *The Charleston Gazette* telling the censors that "because you banned my books, every kid in that county will read them, every single one of them. Because book banners are invariably idiots, they don't know how the world works—but writers and English teachers do" (Conroy 2007, A5). This is most certainly not the effect censors hope for when they challenge books.

Scarcity also has appeal because of its ability to help define the self. It allows the owner to believe that having something scarce makes one unique and special by acquiring something not everyone is able to obtain (Pratkinis and Aronson 2001). For children, reading censored material could be done to prove they have grown up or that they are different than the older generation. For example, reading J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* may be a rite of passage for American youth not only because of the content in the book but also because the controversy surrounding the book gives young readers a sense of breaking the rules and rebelling against the status quo.

## First Amendment

The First Amendment right to "freedom of speech, or of the press" is often used by those on the anti-censorship side of book banning controversies (Lambe 2002). The First Amendment itself is not without its own controversies. Countless court cases throughout U.S. history have dealt with the rights one has under the First Amendment (Cornell University Law School 2010). And while many Americans believe in the right to free speech and press, few would argue that these rights are absolute. Dangerous speech, such as speech that purposely incites a riot, and defamatory speech, such as speech that is knowingly harmful and untrue, are examples of speech that may not be protected under the First Amendment.

Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the ALA, the National Coalition Against Censorship, and the Free Expression Policy Project make it their mission to protect the First Amendment rights of the American people. Librarians also have a duty to protect a corollary freedom of the First Amendment: the right to read. The ALA's *Library Bill of Rights* clearly states that "libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (OIF 2006, 55). Issues of free speech and the right to read overrun the library from the books on the shelves and the filters on the computers to the use of library meeting rooms and display areas (Minow and Lipinski 2003). In fact the OIF is one of the premier organizational watchdogs for books and media censorship.

Defending the First Amendment rights of their patrons has become one of the defining factors of being a librarian. Celebrating the OIF's Banned Book Week through the showcasing and reading

of banned books allows librarians to define themselves as defenders of intellectual freedom. The commitment to defend freedom of expression overrides the content of a book even when a person might object to it on a personal level (McLeod, Lambe, and Paek 2005). This is the opposite of those on the other side of the banning who, while they may believe in freedom of speech, view it as having limitations when that speech is perceived to be harmful.

## Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to better understand the motives for and arguments against challenges to the acclaimed children's book *And Tango Makes Three*. Newspaper and library journal articles that discuss the controversy surrounding *And Tango Makes Three* were analyzed for this study. These articles included news stories and commentary. While in most third-person-effect research the material subjects read or watch is selected by the researcher, this study focused on a book that already had an existing controversy. The purpose here was to understand these three phenomena in an environment where they naturally take place. There is also the added benefit of reading texts written by or quoted from those who act on their third-person or scarcity perceptions.

Research Question: What reasoning was given by both those who challenged the controversial children's book *And Tango Makes Three* and those who opposed the challenges?

## Method

This study focused specifically on the book *And Tango Makes Three*, which is a children's picture book that was published in 2005 by Simon & Schuster. The book is based on the true story of two Central Park Zoo penguins, Roy and Silo, who formed a couple. After watching them create a nest and try to hatch a rock that resembled an egg, their keeper gave the two penguins a real penguin egg that had been abandoned. Roy and Silo successfully hatched the egg and raised the female baby penguin named Tango. Written by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell and illustrated by Henry Cole, *And Tango Makes Three* has received many awards, including being an ALA Notable Children's Book Nominee, the ASPCA Henry Bergh Book Award Winner, one of the Bank Street Best Books of the Year, and a Lambda Literary Award Finalist (Simon & Schuster 2011).

*And Tango Makes Three* also was the most challenged book of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010 and the second most challenged book of 2009 (after Lauren Myracle's *ttyl, ttfn, and l8r, g8r*) (ALA 2011a, 2011b). OIF defines a challenge as "a formal, written complaint, filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness" (ALA 2011a). Reasons for such challenges include the book being about homosexuality, appearing anti-family, and being unsuited to its age group. (The publisher-suggested age range for *Tango* is ages 4–8.)

Articles published between 2005 and 2007 were analyzed to investigate the beginning of this phenomenon. Eleven newspapers and four library journals were selected for the study. This stratified sampling strategy was used to better understand the reasoning of those most likely to be concerned about the book and its various challenges. Stratified sampling allows for the study of distinct subpopulations. Preselection of specific newspapers and journals makes available those voices that are imperative to the research question (Krippendorff 2004). Selected newspapers

included three local and eight national newspapers. The national newspapers included the *Chicago Tribune*, *Denver Post*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *USA Today*. These newspapers were chosen because of their high circulation rates and their varied locations throughout the United States. The newspapers were chosen ahead of time, therefore some had several articles on *And Tango Makes Three* challenges while others had no articles. Of the articles that did mention the book, the only ones used were those that discussed the controversies surrounding the book. Articles such as book reviews or news stories about the real-life penguins the book is based on were not used for this study. Articles were found using the databases LexisNexis Academic and ProQuest Newspapers. When a publication could not be found in these databases, articles were retrieved from either microfiche or a physical copy of the newspaper.

Three local papers were selected because of their proximity to schools and libraries where *Tango* had been challenged. Most stories covered in local papers centered on local challenges to the book. The *St. Louis Post* covered parental challenges to the book being part of the Shiloh Elementary School library in Illinois. The *St. Joseph News* centered on the relocation of the book in two Rolling Hills libraries from the children’s nonfiction section to the less-popular fiction section after two parents complained. The *Charlotte Observer* covered the story of four Charlotte-Mecklenburg elementary school libraries that pulled the book—without following school policies—after several parents complained.

Four library journals were selected and included: *American Libraries*, *Library Journal*, *School Library Journal*, and *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*. These four selections were chosen because as a whole they reflect a variety of library types and library-science issues.

Qualitative content analysis was done on articles about challenges to *Tango*. The concepts of third-person effect, scarcity, and First Amendment rights were used to help focus the interpretation of texts. Content analysis has different definitions depending on the text to be analyzed, the research question that is put forth, and the ideological framework of the researcher (White and Marsh 2006). Qualitative content analysis is a research technique for making valid “inferences from text to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff 2004, 18). It is important to point out that this type of analysis is inductive and that instead of generalizability there is transferability (White and Marsh 2006). This type of research method is a step away from traditional methods for studying censorship, third-person effect, and scarcity; past research in this area has mainly been quantitative and employed experimental and survey methods.

## Findings

Of the 15 resources used for this study, 31 relevant articles were found. These articles consisted of 24 news stories, 4 opinion pieces, and an informational article. While the news stories were dispersed among the local newspapers, national newspapers, and library journals, all of the opinion pieces came from the national newspapers. All opinion pieces were written by staff writers with the exception of a letter to the editor from a reader responding to an earlier opinion piece about the book.

By analyzing the articles, paying close attention to examples of third-person effect, scarcity, and First Amendment rights, several major themes emerged. Five categories were created to reflect these themes: third-person effect, parental rights, scarcity, First Amendment rights, and diversity.



After these five categories were created, the articles were again analyzed for instances of these themes within each article. Articles and passages with similar themes were grouped together and relevant quotes were pulled out that would help illustrate each category and its relation to the situation being studied.

### Third-Person Effect

I don't have a problem with the book being at the library, but it is not appropriate material for children in that [one-to-three-year-old] age group. I'd feel the same way if the penguins were murderers or rapists. Don't sugarcoat that type of material by making it pertain to cute penguins, or dogs or kittens or whatever. It's not appropriate material for a three-year-old to see and hear. (OIF 2007b, para. 4)

This quote came from the mother of a 17-month-old who became upset when she noticed her friend had checked out *And Tango Makes Three* for her three-year-old from the local public library. It is from one of the seven articles that were found to have instances of the perceived effects the book could have on children. These instances pertained to the age inappropriateness of the book's homosexual content. All third-person effects that were found related to the book's potential influence on children. This is understandable as the intended audience for the book is young children. However, the effects were not limited to only "other" people's children. The parents worried about the perceived effects of the book's homosexual content on their own children as well.

Perceived third-person effects were not limited to parents. In conservative talk radio show host and movie critic Michael Medved wrote in his *USA Today* of his disapproval over *Tango* and the animated movie *Happy Feet* being promoted as entertainment for children even though they discuss controversial issues such as homosexuality and global warming. "In the earliest stages of life, however, it makes sense to keep them protected from such conflicts and to avoid using preschoolers—and penguins—as the pawns of propaganda" (Medved 2006, A13). His description of children as "pawns of propaganda" and his call to "spare" them from controversy portrays children as an impressionable "other" that should be sheltered from certain topics.

### Parental Rights

*Please allow us to know when our child is ready for certain introductions. Each of us knows our child best. (Leventis 2006, C2)*

Parental rights were expressed by both those that believed the book should be censored and those that believed the book should be left in libraries. These rights centered on the belief that parents should choose when and how controversial issues are introduced to their children. One board member for a library with complaints about the book stated that it was "not the library's interest to censor material or suggest to parents what is appropriate for their children" (OIF 2007b, 2). Arguments for parental rights were found in 13 of the 31 articles analyzed for this study. The right of parents to decide what their children have access to was such a strong argument for both sides of the controversy that more articles mentioned parental rights than any other theme analyzed.

Parents and library board members were not the only people who voiced their opinion about the rights of parents. Along with Medved's comments for *USA Today*, Randy Thomasson, president of the California-based Campaign for Children and Families, also used parental rights as reasoning for challenging *And Tango Makes Three*. In fact, Thomasson went so far as to attack

libraries, telling parents that they “can no longer trust libraries to protect their children’s innocence or uphold appropriate standards. Voters should demand that books with harmful content be removed from school and city libraries” (Swanson 2007, A20).

## Scarcity

Miller noted that the flap spurred interest in the book, which tells about two male penguins in New York’s Central Park Zoo who paired up and hatched an adopted egg. “Everybody wants to read that book,” Miller said. “It’s a wonderful way to get students and parents reading.” (OIF 2007a, para.11)

Gloria Miller was a library director at one of the schools where the book was challenged. In her defense of keeping *And Tango Makes Three* in the library, she noted that the book seemed to be more popular once there had been talk of its removal. However, Miller’s comment was unusual. Articles that mentioned the effects of scarcity were surprisingly limited, with only 3 of the 31 articles including it.

This might have happened for several reasons. First, most of the news articles tended to focus on the complaints of those parents challenging the book or those defending the book and the library. There was little written about the effect the controversy was having on the broader community in which the challenges were taking place. Also, only the four Charlotte-Mecklenburg elementary schools took the book off the shelves, and even then, it was only for a few days. The book remained available to patrons during and after the other challenges that were studied. The intended audience for the book (children) may also be a reason why the effects of scarcity were not found. The elementary children that were affected by these challenges might not have even known the book was being challenged because they are less likely to read the local paper or watch the local news as compared to adults or teenagers.

Because there was little about scarcity in the text of the articles, the dates and content of the articles were studied to find the effects of scarcity. In doing database searches for *And Tango Makes Three*, it was found that the majority of articles on the book were not book reviews but were instead about book challenges. Forty-two of the 59 articles in the databases Library and Information Science Abstracts and ProQuest Newspapers deal with controversies surrounding the book. The majority of the articles (47 of 59) were written well after the book’s June 1, 2005, publication date. These articles also tend to be written around the time the book was challenged or when the ALA named it the most challenged book of a given year. This clearly shows the extra level of attention a book can potentially receive when it is challenged.

## First Amendment Rights

*The freedom to read is continuously under attack from private groups, and sometimes from parents and school administrators. (Harmon 2007, 27)*

The rise in media coverage for a challenged book also reveals how strongly many American organizations and citizens support the First Amendment. Nine of the 31 analyzed articles had anti-censorship language that alluded to the freedom to read. Most came from people in the library field or who worked for the ALA. The newspaper articles that discussed *And Tango Makes Three* as well as Banned Book Week and the ALA’s “10 Most Challenged Books of 2006” were particularly rich in examples of First Amendment rights language. The above quote came from Hofstra University library administrator Sarah McCleskey in a *New York Daily News*

article about her university's participation in ALA's Banned Books Week. During this annual event, libraries across the country read banned books and hold lectures and discussions about book banning and intellectual freedom in order to inform the public and to show support for the freedom to read.

Events like Banned Books Week, as well as quotes from the texts analyzed, show how librarians find professional identity in their fight to protect the freedom to read. "The consequences of banning material can have major cultural implications and it's something librarians fight constantly" was the response of Barbara Read, director of Rolling Hills Consolidated Library when asked about her decision to keep *Tango* in her library after it had been challenged (Children's Book Moved 2006, para.16). From the articles analyzed, the freedom to read was viewed as a professional principle as well as a major reason for keeping the book in the library where children could have access to it.

## Diversity

*Libraries are one place in the community where everyone is represented on the shelves. That's one of our roles. (Swanson 2007, A20)*

This quote came from Judith Krug, former director of the OIF, and is an example of the most prevalent theme found in the anti-censorship language analyzed. Many library professionals and parents used the need for diversity of ideas as a reason to keep *And Tango Makes Three* in the library. Eleven of the 31 articles had quotes about diversity and its role in library collection development. Some anti-censorship advocates thought that taking the book out of the library would "discriminate" (Leventis 2006, C2) and is a way to "reinforce a culture's stereotype" (Cooperberg 2006, A19).

Judith Krug's quote also shows, again, how much a librarian's identity centers around this idea of freedom to read and the notion that there should be resources available for all types of people in the community. Providing access to materials on a diverse set of issues and viewpoints was found to be one of the major roles a library plays in a community. Librarians were quoted saying that a library "should represent different aspects of our society" (Leventis 2006, C2) and "is there for the public and there are all types of different viewpoints" (Children's Book Moved 2006, para. 15).

## Discussion

Five major themes were found in this analysis of challenges to the children's book *And Tango Makes Three*: third-person effect, parental rights, scarcity, First Amendment rights, and diversity. Third-person effect and parental rights were the two most often employed by those who challenged the book. Anti-censorship advocates also voiced the need for parental rights as well as using the freedom to read and the need for diversity of ideas as reasons to keep *Tango* in the library. Scarcity was, on a small scale, found to be an effect of book challenges. Once the book was challenged there was a rise in the number of articles that were written about it, and a few librarians noticed an increase in demand for the book.

Perceptions of third-person effects came from parents and commentators who believed the homosexual undertones of the book were too mature for children. These parents worried about the perceived effects not only on other people's children, but on their own children as well. This



is a shift in the third-person effect model. Here the “other” is not other people’s children, but all children. Taking part of Davison’s (1983) initial hypothesis for the third-person effect relationship, in instances of censorship the relationship would be this: the impact will not be on *me* (the parent who challenges a book) or *you* (the librarian, parent, or school board member), but on *them* (all children who have access to the book)—the third person. This may be because of the modern, Western view of children as “human becomings rather than human beings” (Holloway and Valentine 2003, 5). Differences in age have an influence over perceptions of third-person effects here because “children” is not only a biological term but also a socially constructed one. Defining children as incomplete adults could explain why they are especially prone to the category of “other” in the third-person effect hypothesis and are used as reasoning for censorship of books, art, and media.

The perceived effects of the book’s homosexual content on children lead to a second theme being used by those who challenged the book. Parental rights were used by both parents and commentators who did not want children to have access to the book. They voiced the desire for parents, not the government or libraries, to decide what access children have to controversial material. This reasoning was not very strong because anti-censorship advocates also used parental rights in their defense of the book. In their argument, children should have access to the book so that parents could decide whether it was appropriate for their child. Parental rights were a logical argument from both perspectives that loses impact because of its duality.

First Amendment rights were a popular anti-censorship argument used by those in the library field. And while freedom of speech and the right to read are powerful anti-censorship tools, this argument is made less strong because this censorship dealt with young children. While under the guardianship of their parents, children do not have the same legal rights as adults. This could be a reason why it was not the most popular theme found in the study. This might also have happened because many of the parents didn’t want to ban the book completely but instead wanted restricted access for young children (OIF 2007b). It is expected that there would be even more mentions of First Amendment rights in censorship cases that deal with adults and in cases where a book is completely banned from a library’s shelves.

Diversity was the major theme used by anti-censorship advocates. This aligns with the nature of modern library collection development policies, which try to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. Diversity might also have been a popular argument because the content of the book portrayed a different type of family unit and dealt with a topic that is not traditionally discussed in children’s literature.

First Amendment and diversity arguments also showed how much the library and the librarian are defined by those two beliefs. The mission of the library and the role of the librarian were brought into the debate over banned and challenged books. These challenges banded like-minded librarians together in their advocacy for the First Amendment rights of their patrons.

## Future Research

Book challenges continue to occur in schools and libraries. Such challenges reside under the Constitutional provision of freedom of speech. Such opportunities to engage in dialogue are part of the democratic way of life. The majority of book challenges involve books aimed at children and young adults (Swanson 2007), such as the book used for this study. *And Tango Makes Three*

was the most banned book for several years and therefore had a rich set of data from which to pull. Future research might focus on a different type of book or even a set of controversial books, such as the Harry Potter series. Another possibility would be a study on challenges to a variety of controversial books on different topics and for different age groups.

This study focused on the analysis of the quotes from parents and library professionals that were found in the news articles from around the United States. Because articles were used, perceptions about the challenges were viewed through a journalistic lens. Future research could include a case study on a specific library dealing with a book challenge. The five themes found in this study (third-person effects, parental rights, scarcity, First Amendment rights, and diversity) could be used as a theoretical framework. These themes can help guide future studies to get an even deeper understanding of the motives and attitudes that surround book challenges and censorship.

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