Short Communication

Systematic bias in trait attributions for deceased friends and relatives

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ABSTRACT

Bering (2006) put forward the claim that the deceased are viewed as authoritative moral figures, and Bering, MacLeod, and Shackelford (2005) present evidence supporting this. We extend Bering's conjecture through a within-subjects quasi-experimental study testing the possibility that person perception regarding personality traits might shift in a context where (a) the target is someone known personally, and (b) the target happens to be deceased. One-hundred ten undergraduate students in Manila were asked to rate the Big Five traits of two older adult individuals known to them personally, one of whom must be alive, and the other deceased. Using multilevel modeling, we found that decedent targets on average were rated with higher Extraversion and Agreeableness scores compared to living targets, and that this held even when controlling for relational closeness and other possible covariates. Additionally, relational closeness was associated with higher ratings for all traits regardless of whether they were alive or not, indicating the possibility of a halo effect.

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1. Introduction

People are quite happy to not just believe in people that don't exist, but to also have meaningful relationships with these absent others (for example, Giles, 2002). Bering (2006) puts forward the interesting argument that we utilize the same cognitive apparatus for imagining living people who are away as we do for imagining deceased acquaintances. In line with this, Bering, McLeod, and Shackelford (2005, Study 1) tested the novel hypothesis that people would rate a stranger (represented by a black and white photograph) more favorably after they learn that the stranger has passed away recently. They found an increase in ratings of positive traits but this was only statistically significant in judgments of the stranger's "kindness/morality". Bering et al. (2005) argue that people are motivated to submit to the moral superiority of the dead by attributing moral traits to them, out of fear of possible supernatural punishment. However, it is easy to grant biasing effects when the judgment is made in such a context-poor setting, as has been repeatedly shown in trait attribution studies.

1.1. Person-perception

With regards to the general field of person-perception, a well-established observation is that our evaluations of other people are easily influenced by seemingly irrelevant pieces of data. The classic example is Solomon Asch's (1946) experiment demonstrating that including the word "warm" in a list of traits disproportionately shifts the evaluation of hypothetical persons (as opposed to the word "cold"). Studies on the halo effect have taught us how attractiveness influences the judgment of various socially desirable personality traits, like being more successful and competent (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Other situational influences include mood (Mayer, Gaschke, Braverman, & Evans, 1992), and whether they are being evaluated alone or in a group (Walker & Vul, 2013).

1.2. Hagiographic or sympathetic

People might exaggerate the socially desirable traits of dead loved ones in a uniformly positive manner, or it might be the case that people generally reimagine only the traits that cast the deceased as moral guardians. Bering et al. (2005) argue for the latter, although their results could actually also support the former. This fits with admonitions against speaking ill of the dead and the portrayal of the dead as saintly. We refer to this as the *hagiographic* hypothesis.

But dead relatives or spouses are not cultural paragons nor are they blank strangers that we can freely project imagined histories on. Previous personal contact makes the now deceased acquaintance feel further

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away, in "another place". Bering (2006) himself argues for the idea of a metaphorical separation in terms of space rather than existence. Removal from the material world makes them less potent, and these diminished persons might be seen with warmer traits (e.g., agreeableness and extraversion) but not as more competent (e.g., conscientiousness) as seen in studies of stereotypes (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). We refer to this as the *sympathetic* hypothesis.

The two hypotheses are not necessarily exclusive, and they might correspond to two different cultural scripts operating in different contexts.

In the study described below, we examine whether there will be detectable biases in trait attributions if the deceased person being rated is known to the respondent personally.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The only comparable study is by Bering et al. (2005) where they had 52 respondents in a repeated measures design, so we thought it prudent to target a sample size roughly twice that size.

One hundred ten undergraduate students (mean age = 20.54, SD = 2.02; 123 females) studying in Manila were recruited for the study. The sample was gathered through purposive sampling to select people who fit the following criteria: young adults between 18 and 25 years of age; can name two target persons they know personally who are above 60 years of age; of the two people, one must be alive at the time of the study, and the other must be deceased (not <6 months, not >5 years).[2] Participants were asked to refer other people who fit the criteria. All participants were English speaking bilinguals, and the materials provided to them were in English.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Personality Traits

The IPIP 50-item representation (http://ipip.ori.org/New_IPIP-50-item-scale.htm; Goldberg, n.d.) derived from the IPIP-FFM measure developed by Goldberg (1992) was used to measure the Big Five personality traits of openness (e.g., "…has a vivid imagination"), conscientiousness (e.g., "…pays attention to details"), extraversion (e.g., "…is the life of the party"), agreeableness (e.g., "…sympathizes with others' feelings"), and emotional stability (e.g., "…worries about things"). The items and instructions were modified and presented as an other-rating task. The responses to the items were rated in a 5-point Likert scale (Very Inaccurate, Moderately Inaccurate, Neither Accurate nor Inaccurate, Moderately Accurate, and Very Accurate). The subscales were found to have acceptable reliability, with alpha coefficient of 0.78 for openness, 0.69 for conscientiousness, 0.73 for extraversion, 0.76 for agreeableness, and 0.80 for emotional stability.

2.2.2. Time of Last Contact

A scale that determines the amount of time since the participant had last seen the loved one that he or she had identified. This scale was used to rate the last time the participants have seen or interacted with both the loved ones, deceased and alive respectively. This scale consists of 6 options ranging from "yesterday-5 months ago" to "49–60 months ago (5 years)" that the participants have to choose from.

2.2.3. Relational Closeness

It would be expected that, for both living and deceased targets, a halo effect due to having good relations would result in higher ratings for socially desirable traits (Jacobs & Kozlowski, 1985). To control for this, a single question was included that determines the degree of closeness felt by the participant for the friend or relative to be rated. Participants responded to the statement "How close are you with this person?" using a rating scale of 1–10, wherein 1 is considered as the lowest degree of closeness and 10 as the highest degree of closeness.

2.3. Procedure

A brief description of what the study is about was provided. The participants were then asked if they are willing to take part in our study and were asked to sign the consent form. They were told that they have the right to withdraw their participation at any point of the procedure whenever they feel uncomfortable. If a participant opts to continue with the procedure, he or she will be provided with the questionnaire that contains two sets of scales to be rated in terms of how he or she perceives the personality traits of each of the loved ones (alive and deceased) separately. The sequence of questionnaires were counterbalanced, where half of the participants had to rate the living loved one first and the deceased loved one after and the other half had to rate the deceased loved one first and the living loved one after. The participants were then debriefed and were given incentives. Some of the participants were asked to accomplish the survey online.

2.4. Data structure and analysis

A multilevel analysis was carried out to account for both within-person variance when rating living and decedent targets, and also patterns of ratings that differed across persons. Each Big Five trait was modeled separately as the dependent variable of analyses implemented using the lme4 package (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015) for the R statistical software (R Core Team, 2016). Models were fitted using maximum-likelihood estimation. For each analysis, the Level 1 equation consisted of variables associated with each target person being rated. Separate models were tried that included Age and Sex of the rater as control variables at Level 2, but since their exclusion did not affect the parameter estimates for the main variables of interest at Level 1 they were left out of the final model.

For all models the intercept was allowed to vary randomly. Modeling random slopes for the variable of most interest, Decedent, did not seem to improve model fit significantly, and excluding this term from the model had minimal effect on parameter estimates. Since there were too few observations within each rater, variance in slopes could not be reliably estimated for any of the other predictors so the models reported do not include any random slope terms.

Aside from the individual predictors, we tested whether there was a significant interaction between Relational Closeness and the Decedent variable. Since we have evoked the concept of metaphorical distancing regarding how people might imagine dead friends and relatives, it might be supposed that greater Closeness prior to the targets passing would generate more pronounced Decedent effects. On the other hand, we cannot also rule out the possibility that the ratings of Closeness themselves are partly influenced by the metaphor of distance: that the dead now feel further away. As a consequence we could just as well pose the hypothesis that there will be less of a halo effect for

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[2] This was done to ensure the comparability of the targets. Pilot surveys showed that the natural tendency for young people was to select same-age friends as the living target, and deceased grandparents as the other. This would lead to confounding of effects that would be difficult to disentangle, so we tried to limit the range as much as possible. A similar reasoning was used when deciding to control for how recent the last contact with the target was. We suspected that without this limit, people would predominantly nominate deceased targets from their distant personal history, which could influence their recall and attribution of that person's traits. Living targets, on the other hand, would be biased towards people that the respondent had regular continuing contact with at the time of responding. Again, we felt in this instant that it would be easier to correct for these effects if the range was sufficiently small.