How would the self be remembered? Evidence for posthumous self-verification

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ABSTRACT

Three correlational studies and one experiment examined self-verification versus self-enhancement in a posthumous context. In Study 1, in two samples (combined $N = 3029$) modal responses suggest a desire to be remembered as one really is, far into the future. Studies 2 ($N = 92$) and 3 ($N = 414$) showed that posthumous self-verification was independent of life satisfaction, positive self-evaluations, and self-construals but was related to self-esteem, the search for meaning in life, and generativity. In Study 4 ($N = 461$), the salience of negative and positive self-aspects was manipulated. Even when negative qualities were salient, the majority of participants (61%) preferred to be remembered as they really are. The role of self-verification in existential concerns is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Interacting with others, a person has at least two possible strategies. First, one can self-enhance, or present the self in an exceedingly positive light (Leary, 2007). Second, one can self-verify, or present the self in a way that leads others to perceive one as one perceives the self (Swann, 2011). Which of these strategies is more commonly preferred (among living people) is a matter of debate (Kwang & Swann, 2010). We examined self-presentational preferences in an unusual way, focusing on preferences for self-presentation long after one has died. Across three correlational studies and one experiment, we tested the prediction that people would prefer posthumously self-verifying presentations to posthumously self-enhancing ones. The posthumous context provides a particularly interesting way to examine the potential existential functions of self-verification. Quite simply, after death, the social risks of self-enhancement are absent: There is no chance of failing to live up to overly high expectations. Similarly, after death, the social expedience, controllability, and predictability provided by accurate social evaluations of the self are irrelevant. Nevertheless, given the role of accurate self-views in authenticity and existential meaning, we predict that people would prefer accurate to overly positive posthumous self-views. Before presenting the studies, we briefly review self-verification

theory and some of the unusual issues that are evoked by considering posthumous self-views to expand the rationale for our prediction.

1.1. Self-enhancement and self-verification

According to Self-Verification Theory (Swann, 1983; Swann, 2011), self-views have three functions in people's lives. These views serve to make predictions about the world; to guide behavior; and to maintain a sense of continuity and coherence. Self-enhancement stems from motivations to feel good about oneself and to win the favor of others. However, presenting an overly positive version of oneself creates expectations that may be difficult to live up to in future interpersonal exchanges. Moreover, creating a social view of oneself that is unrealistically positive challenges the consistency and stability provided by self-views. People tend to prefer self-verifying (vs. self-enhancing) views (Kwang & Swann, 2010). Self-verifying views, even when they are negative, lead to less physiological stress and other benefits, including enhanced creativity (Ayduk, Gyurak, Akinola, & Mendes, 2012).

The preference for self-verification among the living can be explained in at least three ways. First, self-verifying interactions are social expedient and do not create unrealistic expectations. Second, self-verification helps to ensure controllability and predictability in social interactions (e.g., Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992), which is essential to adaptive functioning. Finally, such views also serve the desire to validate self-knowledge (e.g.,

Swann et al., 1992). Having others know oneself is relevant to concerns for legacy, generativity, and authenticity.

Being known "for who one truly is" is an important existential challenge (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983). Self-reported authenticity is associated with well-being, across cultures (Robinson, Lopez, Ramos, & Nartova-Bochaver, 2013). Similarly, authentic *behavior* is positively associated with subjective well-being (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001), self-esteem (Heppner et al., 2008; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), hope (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996), positive affect (Heppner et al., 2008), and meaning in life (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; McGregor & Little, 1998). Moreover, those who are accurately perceived by others show heightened levels of psychological adjustment (Human & Biesanz, 2013). To the extent that self-verification involves expressing one's authentic self, we might afford it a place in the experience of existential meaning.

1.2. Posthumous self-presentation

While living, self-presentation is intricately tied to current and future social interactions. After death, such issues are no longer at stake. We might expect, then, that preferences for posthumous self-presentations would be quite self-enhancing. Many years hence, no one will know that one was, in fact, a selfish jerk and not the generous philanthropist described on a tombstone. Why not posthumously self-enhance? Yet leaving a positive but false legacy may be unappealing for a variety of reasons.

Death is the ultimate threat to existential meaning (e.g., Sullivan, Kosloff, & Greenberg, 2013). After death, social perception is all that remains of the self. Being remembered by one's social group is a way of attaining symbolic immortality (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998). For social memory to offer such immortality, it would seem crucial to be remembered accurately. We propose that preferences for the character and content of this social memory will serve the existential function of preserving identity: Of leaving not simply a positive legacy but one that reveals, perhaps, for a final time, one's true self.

Indeed, evaluative concerns may not be at the forefront of people's minds as they consider their final chance to make an impression. For example, in 2014, per his wishes, following a procession through town, Billy Standley of Mechanicsburg, OH, was buried astride his 1967 Electra Glide Cruiser in a Plexiglass box that Standley had crafted for the purpose. Others have planned funerals that include their corpse posed in a familiar setting (e.g., holding playing cards, with a beer and cigarette nearby, Robertson & Robles, 2014). Such examples suggest a desire for making not so much a positive impression but one that verifies the self.

1.3. Overview of current studies

The goal of the present studies was to examine whether posthumous self-views would reflect a desire for self-enhancement or self-verification. Based on the existential function of social memory, we predicted that individuals would prefer to self-verify posthumously, even if being remembered as they are might not represent a wholly positive presentation of the self. We tested this prediction in four studies. Study 1 was primarily descriptive. In this study, we examined preferences for posthumous self-presentation and considered relationships between these preferences, demographics, and self-views in two large samples. Studies 2 and 3 examined whether individuals who express a desire for posthumous self-views to possess evaluatively better selves to begin with.

Finally, Study 4 was an experiment that sought to rule out the influence of the death positivity bias in preferences for posthumous self-verification. Loosely translated into the English aphorism, "Do not speak ill of the dead," the mortuary quote, "*De mortuis nihil nisi bonum*" (attributed to Chilon of Sparta, 600 BCE) expresses the impropriety of saying bad things about dead people. Research supports the contention that people evaluate the dead more positively than the living (Allison, Eylon, Beggan, & Bachelder, 2009; Bering, McLeod, & Shackelford, 2005). The existence of this norm suggests that expressing a desire for posthumous self-verification is unlikely to imply being remembered *negatively*. In Study 4, we manipulated the accessibility of negative self-aspects to see if the preference for posthumous self-verification persists even after dwelling on one's negative characteristics.

2. Study 1

Participants in Study 1 rated their preferences for how they would be portrayed many years in the future. Responses ranged from "more negatively than you really are" to "more positively than you really are," with the midpoint being "exactly as you are." The first goal of the study was to simply gain descriptive information about these responses. Study 1 included two samples. Sample 1 was undergraduates and Sample 2 non-college adults. Including Sample 2 was important because being remembered "as one really is" might be especially appealing to individuals in the college demographic. Young adults are at their physical peak and these years are often considered "the best years" of one's life. For such individuals, "exactly as they are" might imply the self at its best (and most beloved, Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012). In addition to this descriptive goal, Study 1 examined the associations between posthumous self-presentation and demographic variables as well as self-esteem (in Sample 1).

2.1. Method

Participants (*N* = 3029) rated three scenarios in an online format. Because incidental reminders of death can influence self-esteem (King, Hicks, & Abdelkhalik, 2009) and concerns for positive legacy (Wade-Benzoni, Tost, Hernandez, & Larrick, 2012), the scenarios avoided explicit mention of participants' being dead and were framed such that participants were being remembered for positive reasons:

(1) Imagine that throughout your life you achieved many great accomplishments. 100 years from now, a historical biographer decides to write a book chronicling your life. How would you want yourself to be portrayed in this biography?

(2) In 2111 (2114 in Sample 2, each reflecting the date 100 years after the study), a sculptor is commissioned to make a sculpture of you to be displayed prominently in the city square to honor your life's achievements. How would you want this sculpture to look?

(3) Imagine that one day you decided to write a letter about yourself for your relatives to have to remember you for many generations to come. How will you portray yourself?

Scenarios were rated on a scale from 1 (more negatively than you really are) to 7 (more positively than you really are), with the midpoint (4) labeled, exactly as you are.

Participants in Sample 1 (*n* = 1999) were undergraduates who completed the measures as part of a mass testing in General Psychology. As such, the size of this sample was determined by the number of students choosing to complete this survey. Sample 2 (*n* = 1030) was an age diverse (range = 18–79), sample of Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers (paid $0.10). In keeping with the large size of Sample 1, we aimed for 1000 participants for this sample. Demographics for both samples are shown in Table 1.