Examining developmental and religious differences in trait attributions to dead agents

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Internal (Natural) vs. external

Bering’s research is built upon existing naturalistic theories of religion, such as teleological reasoning, common-sense dualism, and the theory of mind.

In his view the majority of people turn to religion because of subjective negative experiences, not objective events in the hostile environment.
Teleological reasoning

- Bering traced our tendency to believe in the supernatural to instinct. Even if events in the universe are random, we tend to find a pattern or a purpose in these events. This tendency was developed among our ancestors throughout the history of evolution.

- Many people are helpless while facing unfortunate events, and one adaptive or coping mechanism people use is to optimize negative outcomes that are out of their control, such as putting their faith on an external agency (e.g. God) (Bering, 2003, 2012).
Bering (2002) hypothesized that humans have a natural tendency to perceive that cognitive systems continue to function after death, and this disposition might be the psychological foundation of religion. The underlying mechanism of this inclination is called the “theory of mind” (Bering, 2006, p.253).
Bering et al. study

- Puppet alligator “ate” puppet rat. Children still believed that the rat “missed” his mother.
- Obituary: People tend to say nice things related to the kindness/morality of the dead.
- Ghost story: Examinees tended not to cheat when they were told that the ghost of the programmer who created the computerized exam was haunting.
Bering's study

- Dead agent: Participants were asked to rate the traits of three strangers displayed in photos.
- A week later they returned to continue the study but were told that one of the persons had died over the weekend.
- Afterwards, on average, participants rated the dead person more favorably than others, and this result was interpreted by fear of supernatural punishment.
Problems

- There are alternate explanations to this outcome.
- The works of a deceased artist may become more valuable because this artist can no longer produce any more paintings. Similarly, we may say nice things to the dead out of sympathy.
- Data collected from their study cannot identify the cause of positive attributions.
Replication

- Take religious belief into account
- Ask the participants why they gave higher ratings to the dead person.
- Does religious background effect the trait attribute ratings of dead and non-dead agents (between-subject)?
- Does the trait attribute ratings of dead and non-dead agents differ from the first and second sessions (within-subject)?
- Is there an interaction effect between the within-subject and between-subject factors?
Select photos by scores
## Instrument: EOOQ

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</table>
Interview questions

- Can you guess the purpose of this study?
- Why do you give the dead person a more positive rating than others?
- Do you believe in supernatural beings? Please explain.
- Did you experience any supernatural event in the past? Please explain.
- Are you afraid that if you didn’t give positive rating to the dead person, you may face some negative consequence? Please explain.
Three cases are excluded....

Because they know what we tried to do by guessing

\[ n = 38 \]
Quantitative results

There is an within-subject factor effect (posttest-pretest) for alive agents; but no between-group effect (religious vs. non-religious)
Quantitative results

- Almost no difference between religious and non-religious participants in rating of the alive persons.
Quantitative results

- After the religious participants were told that the young man is dead, their post-rating to the "dead" was higher than their pre-rating.
Quantitative results

- The rating for the “dead” by non-religious participants decreased from pretest to posttest.
- In the posttest their scores are the same as that of religious participants.
Qualitative

“Just be nice”

Dark-green cases are non-religious
Qualitative results

Most are not afraid of ghosts (Yellow highlight).

Only two said yes (red arrow)
Conclusion

- Giving higher ratings to the dead does not necessarily imply that we have the natural tendency of believing in supernaturals or active dead agents.
- The quantitative analysis shows that non-religious participants did not increase their ratings from pretest to postest.
- The qualitative data indicate that people just wanted to be nice to the dead.
- Most people reported that they are not afraid of ghosts.