

This document is downloaded from DR-NTU, Nanyang Technological University Library, Singapore.

Title	Systematic bias in trait attributions for deceased friends and relatives
Author(s)	Galang, Adrienne John Real; Ellescas, Bianca Ysabel C.; Santos, Jan Marie E.; Locsin, Maria Aisha V.; Sy, Keena Mayumi D.
Citation	Galang, A. J. R., Ellescas, B. Y. C., Santos, J. M. E., Locsin, M. A. V., & Sy, K. M. D. (2017). Systematic bias in trait attributions for deceased friends and relatives. <i>Personality and Individual Differences</i> , 114, 57-60.
Date	2017
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/43990">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/43990</a>
Rights	© 2017 Elsevier. This is the author created version of a work that has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication by <i>Personality and Individual Differences</i> , Elsevier. It incorporates referee's comments but changes resulting from the publishing process, such as copyediting, structural formatting, may not be reflected in this document. The published version is available at: [ <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.03.051">http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.03.051</a> ].

## 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.

Keywords: person perception, traits, other-ratings, deceased, halo effect

Systematic bias in trait attributions for deceased friends and relatives

## 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 (Study 1, 2005) 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, and Walster, 1972; Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). Other

situational influences include mood (Mayer, Gaschke, Braverman, and Evans, 1992), and whether they are being evaluated alone or in a group (Walker and 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 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, and 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 18-25 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 less than 6 months, not more than 5 years)<sup>1</sup>. 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](http://ipip.ori.org/New_IPIP-50-item-scale.htm)) 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-

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 .78 for openness, .69 for conscientiousness, .73 for extraversion, .76 for agreeableness, and .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 and 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, and 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 decedent targets. Therefore the general form of the equation for final version of each model takes the following form:

Level 1 (Target)

Level 2 (Rater)

Except for the Sex of Target and Decedent variables, predictors were entered into the multilevel analysis group-mean centered, as advised by Nezlek (2011).

Eleven participants supplied at least one invalid entry for the Age of Target data (one person had two invalid entries), so the total of valid Level 1 cases was 198, while for Level 2 cases it was 99.

### 3. RESULTS

Bivariate correlations using the unstructured data show that the Decedent variable was strongly correlated with Time of Last Contact, with living targets being seen more recently than deceased targets (Table 1) which raise concerns about the independence of predictors. However, multicollinearity statistics for the final multilevel models do not indicate significant problems during parameter estimation, with  $VIF < 4$  for all models tested.

**Table 1: Pearson correlation coefficients for unstructured data**

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age of target <sup>a</sup>	73.35 (9.06) <sup>b</sup>									
2 Sex of target <sup>c</sup>	--	.08								
3 Closeness	7.04 (2.17)	.03	.15*							
4 Last contact <sup>d</sup>	1.86 (1.93)	.03	-.28**	-.21**						
5 Decedent <sup>e</sup>	--	.20**	-.25**	-.20**	.72**					
6 Extraversion	31.70 (5.82)	-.03	-.03	.24**	-.04	.05				
7 Agreeableness	36.66 (5.58)	.06	.01	.24**	.06	.17*	.36**			
8 Conscientiousness	34.76 (5.79)	-.07	.10	.24**	-.06	-.06	.30**	.50**		
9 Emotional Stability	30.89 (6.22)	-.03	-.14*	.12	.17*	.22**	.14*	.43**	.28**	
10 Openness	35.21 (5.45)	-.04	-.08	.14*	.06	.11	.19**	.52**	.46**	.48**

<sup>a</sup>Because of some invalid responses, missing data was excluded on a pairwise basis. <sup>b</sup>Estimates are based on a sample of 207 valid responses.

<sup>c</sup>Males coded as -1, females as 1. <sup>d</sup>Living targets coded as -1, deceased as 1. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

**Table 2: Parameter estimates from multilevel analyses**

Model: DV	Parameter estimates (95% CI)					
	Age of target	Sex of target <sup>a</sup>	Closeness	Last contact	Decedent <sup>b</sup>	Closeness x

## Running head: TRAIT ATTRIBUTION BIAS FOR THE DECEASED

	Decedent					
Model 1: Extraversion	-0.10	-0.08	0.71	-0.65	1.75	0.46
	(-0.21 - 0.01)	(-0.85 - 0.70)	(0.22 - 1.20)**	(-1.43 - 0.13)	(0.38 - 3.11)*	(-0.17 - 1.10)
Model 2: Agreeableness	0.10	-0.13	0.95	-0.11	1.39	0.41
	(0.01 - 0.19)*	(-0.79 - 0.54)	(0.54 - 1.35)**	(-0.76 - 0.53)	(0.27 - 2.51)*	(-0.22 - 1.04)
Model 3: Conscientiousness	-0.03	0.26	0.91	0.65	-0.66	0.10
	(-0.13 - 0.07)	(-0.46 - 0.98)	(0.47 - 1.36)**	(-0.05 - 1.35)	(-1.88 - 0.56)	(-0.58 - 0.78)
Model 4: Emotional stability	0.00	-0.59	0.63	0.83	0.21	0.11
	(-0.13 - 0.13)	(-1.45 - 0.27)	(0.06 - 1.20)*	(-0.07 - 1.74)	(-1.37 - 1.78)	(-0.52 - 0.75)
Model 5: Openness	0.05	-0.41	0.75	0.45	0.21	0.25
	(-0.04 - 0.14)	(-1.07 - 0.26)	(0.35 - 1.16)**	(-0.20 - 1.10)	(-0.92 - 1.34)	(-0.37 - 0.87)

<sup>a</sup>Males coded as -1, females as 1. <sup>b</sup>Living targets coded as -1, deceased as 1. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

As expected, Table 2 shows that the degree of Relational Closeness was positively related to higher scores for targets on all models testing the full sample, confirming the possibility of a halo effect for all traits. Despite this, and having accounted for other control variables, there was still a statistically significant relationship between the decedent target and higher trait ratings in the models for Extraversion and Agreeableness. Conscientiousness was negatively related to the Decedent variable, but this was not significant. Finally, for all models the interaction between the Decedent variable and Relational Closeness was not significant.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The results seem more generally consistent with our so-called sympathetic hypothesis, especially

since the effect is concentrated on the “warm” traits of Extraversion and Agreeableness. We also note that only Conscientiousness among all the models tested yielded a negative (though not significant) parameter estimate for the decedent variable, hinting at attributions of slightly lower competence.

In addition, the association of Relational Closeness with higher ratings in all models might be interpreted as a form of halo effect (Thorndike, 1920, as cited in Jacobs and Kozlowski, 1985). This is consistent with previous work showing that while increased intimacy increases accuracy of trait perception, the positive attitudes formed about the person can also lead to increased ratings on socially desirable traits (Kurtz and Sherker, 2003). More importantly and contrary to our expectations, there is no evidence so far that Closeness interacts with the effect of the Decedent variable, possibly indicating separate mechanisms.

One objection that might be raised is that participants could have had a tendency to select decedent targets that were more extraverted and agreeable than the average person, maybe because they are more memorable. However, being young adults, it seems more likely that participants would be selecting remarkable people from the set of *living* people that they know, simply because it is a larger set.

On the other hand, we might assume that it was more likely that deceased targets were in poor health compared to living targets when they last had contact with the raters, evoking warmth through pity (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick, 2007). If it were the true that illness or disability were driving the effects observed and not being deceased, we might expect to see a significant negative effect on Emotional Stability ratings, which was not the case.

The bias observed here could be relevant to fields that sample other-ratings or next-of-kin

testimonies, such as epidemiology and biography. Subsequent studies should examine to what extent judgments of deceased strangers differ from that of departed loved ones.

The current results extend Bering et al.'s (2005) findings and seem to indicate that even in a country as steeped in the rituals of the care for the dead like the Philippines, the youth at least probably feel a love for their departed parents, grandparents, friends, or mentors that is more akin to fondness rather than awe. We have also shown that this is separable from a version the more well-known halo effect. Therefore, this "nimbus" that shrouds the memory of the departed might be a glow that would prove interesting to investigate by its own lights.

## 5. REFERENCES

- Asch, S. E. (1946). Forming impressions of personality. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 41, 258.
- Bates, D., Maechler, M., Bolker, B., & Walker, S. (2015). Fitting Linear Mixed-Effects Models Using lme4. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 67, 1-48.
- Bering, J. M., McLeod, K., & Shackelford, T. K. (2005). Reasoning about dead agents reveals possible adaptive trends. *Human Nature*, 16, 360-381.
- Bering, J. M. (2006). The folk psychology of souls. *Behavioral and brain sciences*, 29(, 453-462.
- Dion, K., Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. (1972). What is beautiful is good. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 24, 285.
- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., & Glick, P. (2007). Universal dimensions of social cognition: Warmth and competence. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 11, 77-83.
- Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media psychology*, 4, 279-305.

Goldberg, L. (n.d.). Administering IPIP Measures, with a 50-item Sample Questionnaire.

Retrieved from [http://ipip.ori.org/New\\_IPIP-50-item-scale.htm](http://ipip.ori.org/New_IPIP-50-item-scale.htm).

Goldberg, L. R. (1992). The development of markers for the Big-Five factor structure.

Psychological assessment, 4, 26.

Jacobs, R., & Kozlowski, S. W. (1985). A closer look at halo error in performance ratings.

Academy of Management Journal, 28, 201-212.

Kurtz, J. E., & Sherker, J. L. (2003). Relationship quality, trait similarity, and self-other agreement on personality ratings in college roommates. *Journal of personality*, 71, 21-48.

Mayer, J. D., Gaschke, Y. N., Braverman, D. L., & Evans, T. W. (1992). Mood-congruent judgment is a general effect. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 63, 119.

Nezlek, J. B. (2011). *Multilevel modeling for social and personality psychology*. SAGE

Publications Ltd.

Nisbett, R. E., & Wilson, T. D. (1977). The halo effect: Evidence for unconscious alteration of judgments. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 35, 250.

R Core Team (2016). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria.

Walker, D., & Vul, E. (2013). Hierarchical encoding makes individuals in a group seem more attractive. *Psychological Science*, 25, 230-235.