The Effects of Target Age and Perceived Death Responsibility on Posthumous Impression Formations

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Death positivity biases and posthumous evaluations are considered a universal normative social phenomenon which influences social judgments of the dead; we postulate that these individual biases are mediated by both sympathy and fear of mortality, or the belief in a just world. Study 1 postulated that sympathy mediates such positivity biases when target responsibility for cause of death is manipulated. We hypothesized the mediation of the just world violation on posthumous evaluatory measures when age at the time of death was manipulated in Study 2. Although results were inconclusive for both studies, alternate hypotheses and boundary conditions of death positivity biases are discussed.
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts/Master of Science.

Dr. Scott T. Allison, Thesis Advisor

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Dr. Donelson Forsyth
THE EFFECTS OF TARGET AGE AND PERCEIVED DEATH RESPONSIBILITY ON POSTHUMOUS IMPRESSION FORMATIONS

By

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B.A., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2005

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The Effect of Target Age and Perceived Death Responsibility on Posthumous Impression Formations

For any culture which is primarily concerned with meaning, the study of death - the only certainty that life holds for us - must be central, for an understanding of death is the key to liberation in life.

--Stanislav Grof

On Monday morning, April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech undergraduate student Cho Seung-Hui shot and killed 33 students and faculty in a rampage that gripped the nation, headlining news stories around the country. As the events of that day became illuminated, many heroic individuals emerged from the tragedy of death and chaos: engineering professor Dr. Librescu, who barricaded entry to prohibit Seung-Hui from reentering classrooms to continue killing, and Waleed Shalaan, fellow student who distracted and charged Seung-Hui to prevent him from shooting his three friends (Gergis, 2007; Willograd, 2007). The tragedy of deaths caused by Seung-Hui shocked the nation, yet people across the country healed through candlelight vigils and moments of silence and dedication to the victims and those individuals deemed "heroes" in the wake of disaster. Amid the nation's anger and fear came an outpouring of praise and idealization both for professor Librescu and Waleed Shalaan and for those victims who died within Seung-Hui's rampage. The reverence for those victims united the nation in sympathy, respect, and idealization for those who died in the face of tragedy. This effect can be seen throughout history and cultures, from biblical narrative examples, such as the
martyrdom and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, to the unified reverence and admiration of the firefighters and victims of modern tragedies like the terrorist attacks on the nation of September 11, 2001. This posthumous idealization found in heroes and victims is not surprising; what is remarkable is the reverence of the dead and posthumously idealization regardless of how an individual is viewed during the course of their life.

Allison and Elyon cite former U.S. President Ronald Reagan as an example of this phenomenon: posthumous media coverage on Reagan was significantly more positive after his death than during his life, even during his tenure as president. Although this heightened favorability of Reagan took some individuals by surprise, especially the nation’s “die-hard liberals,” Reagan’s death significantly altered previous perceptions and evaluations made concerning his leadership abilities and persona (Allison & Eylon, 2004).

Why did Reagan’s posthumous evaluations become more positive than those perceptions garnered by the public during his life? Allison and Elyon postulated that the widely positive media coverage following Reagan’s death was due to the universal norm of honoring the dead; specifically, that individuals show a death positivity bias through reverence and heightened favorability. The death positivity bias involves forming more favorable perceptions and appraisals of the dead than the living (Allison & Goethals, in press; Allison & Eylon, 2004). However, it is not assumed that posthumous impression formations are always positive or occur under all circumstances. Not surprisingly, Virginia Tech gunman Seung-Hui’s death inspired quite the opposite effect, suggesting increasingly negative posthumous impressions. The current study examines which
specific circumstances might mitigate or exaggerate the death positivity bias. Two studies are presented here to investigate the idea that those individuals perceived as less responsible for their deaths (Study 1) and those individuals younger in age at the time of their death (Study 2) predict significantly higher ratings of death positivity bias, such that the posthumous evaluation reflects more favorable judgments concerning respect, admiration, and sympathy. Before reviewing these specific circumstances, we will first review the literature regarding death positivity bias and the association of such positive and negative evaluative impressions merged with both the Stereotype Content Model and Terror Management Theory.

Death Positivity Bias:
Posthumous Impressions and Evaluations

"...it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment..."
--Hebrews 9:27

"All men are wont to praise him is no more."
--Thucydides

The evaluative bias concerning the dead is not a new finding; the notion of heightened posthumous favorability dates back to 650 B.C. in the writings of philosophers deemed the “Seven Sages.” In a manuscript from Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, a warning is posed to “not speak ill of the dead.” Death positivity bias, which delineates the need to praise the dead, is considered a normative cultural influence resulting from human socialization processes (Allison & Goethals, in
press). This posthumous positivity bias does not simply affect unconscious human evaluations of target individuals; death positivity bias is a relatively robust finding that can be elucidated through many behavioral and emotional responses. For example, in simple cognitive tasks involving word stem completion, individuals show more emotionally positive word choice in a sentence completion task after they are primed with human death and mortality examples (DeWall & Baumeister, 2007). Death itself, therefore, seems to elicit more positivity. However, the primary focus of our research is to expand prior findings on general death impressions and judgments and focus instead on the examination of death positivity on affective evaluational formation for recently deceased individuals.

Judgments of both deceased fictitious and deceased famous individuals, for example leaders and celebrities, such as President John F. Kennedy, Sonny Bono, and Frank Sinatra, have significantly been evaluated as more likable, competent, admirable, and sympathetic than when alive or when compared to living equivalent targets (Allison & Goethals, in press; Eylon & Allison, 2005; Allison & Eylon, 2004). The death positivity effect does not just encompass evaluations of the famous or leaders; more positive bias after death is illustrated among laypeople as well as those who are strangers and therefore removed from the perceiver (Allison & Goethals, in press). In a study that utilized a generic summary describing a fictitious middle-aged target and her hobbies, Allison & Eylon (2004) found significant differences within favorability ratings if the target was deceased when compared to alive. All participants read the vignette and rated the target on individual perceptions of favorability; they were then given a filler task.
After completion of the filler task, Allison & Eylon (2004) split participants into two groups and either gave out an additional summary which claimed that “nothing much had changed” within the life of the target or a summary which stated that the target had recently died. Participants then rerated the target again on the same favorability scale, yet only the participants who were informed of the target’s death revealed significant positive changes from time 1 to time 2. Allison and Eylon’s (2004) research support the effect of death positivity bias, with judgments becoming significantly higher and more favorable after participants are informed that the target died.

Evaluations of dead individuals tend to be much more resistant to change than judgments made concerning the living regardless of whether the evaluations are positive or negative. Eylon and Allison (2005) term this phenomena the “frozen in time” effect of death positivity bias. Once an individual has died, impressions and judgments formed become “locked in place,” or frozen in time. When information is provided concerning a target, regardless of whether the content is positive or negative, analyses of results depict that evaluations change significantly less for a dead rather than living target (Eylon & Allison, 2005; Eylon & Allison, 2004). These results were replicated even when the posthumous information was inconsistent with the information given during the target’s life, which suggests further support for the idea that posthumous evaluations, whether positive or negative, are much less malleable than identical evaluations made for a living target.

Posthumous impression bias seems to result independently of information regarding the target persona and context regardless of even informational content (e.g.
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consistency). Bering, McLeod, and Shackelford (2005) investigated judgments made solely from a photograph of a stranger, both before and after participants were told the target was deceased. Similar to the findings of Allison & Eylon (2004), Bering and colleagues utilized a control group in which two photographed targets were still alive. There was a significant change over time in favorability ratings of targets after participants were told the target had died as compared to those targets still alive. This finding further suggests that information provided is irrelevant to activate posthumous impression bias. For example, the acclaim and praise which Professor Librescu, Waleed Shalaan, and Reagan received upon their deaths illustrates this extension of the societal norm of praising the dead through death positivity elevation or bias despite how much information was formerly known regarding their lives or persona.

Despite the finding of posthumous impression formation independent of information, support for the application of death positivity bias in the individual differing cases of Librescu, Shalaan, and Reagan is strengthened in consideration of the many circumstantial differences during both the life and death of each individual. Death seems to produce a much more favorable response and reverence in individuals despite the deceased’s “physical, emotional, or temporal” connection to the perceiver (Allison & Eylon, 2004). More favorable posthumous evaluations are found independent of familiarity of the deceased, perceived competency during life, and gender of perceiver (Allison & Goethals, in press; Allison & Eylon, 2004). However, research has suggested two conditions in which the death positivity bias is not activated as a result of social norms: in the evaluation of dead, immoral leaders (who are judged less favorably in
death rather than in life), and those individuals who committed suicide (Allison & Goethals, in press). Shooter and Virginia Tech student Seung-Hui could be considered an example of negative posthumous impression formation and bias through categorization into both of these conditions.

The conditions under which death positivity bias does not emerge seems to suggest a moral aspect of the activation of praising the dead. Despite the difference in directionality concerning individual morality and death positivity bias (e.g. those judged “immoral” were viewed less favorably posthumously), the evaluational bias still exists. Regardless of the morality of a life an individual lived, we suggest that suicide itself, widely considered a deviant act, can be categorized as immoral. Thus a pattern emerges, termed “extremitization” by Allison and colleagues, in which the good are exalted and the bad are condemned, much more so posthumously than when they were alive (2004). Although the extremitization effect has been widely found when analyzing ratings of persona and content, targets are condemned and portrayed much worse than they were previously in life despite information provided (Allison & Goethals, in press; Eylon & Allison, 2005; Allison & Eylon, 2004). Therefore, we postulate that the extremitization effect is not directly relevant to the present research due to the main application of including information concerning target persona and behaviors. Instead, we argue increased favorability ratings regarding sympathy, admiration, death responsibility, and respect primarily as a function of cause of death and the age of the deceased (rather than providing personal attributes and context of the target’s life).
We argue that differences within positive and negative posthumous impression formation specifically concerning perceived responsibility for death result from the mediating variable of sympathy. Research has revealed that positive posthumous evaluation bias is highly correlated with perceptions of sympathy (Allison & Goethals, in press). This correlation was not replicated in negative posthumous bias, such as in the cases of immoral individuals. Individuals who felt sympathetic toward a targeted individual, particularly one who had died, show preferential treatment toward the target above those targets who are not sympathetic (Allison & Eylon, 2004; Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995). Although we predict the effect of sympathy as a mediating variable on both positive and negative evaluative bias during life (e.g., immoral leaders and the extremitization effect) as well as actual death (e.g., suicide), the proposed study focuses solely on cause of death and subsequent judgments of responsibility. In the present research, we argue that this sympathetic response, in turn, mediates positive posthumous evaluation bias, such that individuals who rate a target as more sympathetic when provided only with varying causes of death also reflect more favorable judgments concerning respect and admiration and lower ratings for death responsibility.

The Stereotype Content Model:

Sympathy as a Mediator

Superficially, the formation and subsequent judgments of stereotypic prejudices may seem arbitrary, yet analyses of stereotype content models suggest that stereotypes serve multiple functions and can be predicted when considering individual emotions and behaviors. Fiske and colleagues (2002) delineate the differing affective and emotional
reactions of *paternalistic prejudice* and *contemptuous prejudice* as models of both judgment formation as well as content. Both categories of prejudice result from not only perceived judgments of individual traits and behaviors (e.g. morality), but also from both the positive and negative outcomes of the individual target (e.g. outcome). Targets portraying negative and uncontrollable outcomes elicit sympathy and pity through the activation of the paternalistic model of stereotype prejudices, whereas those targets with negative and perceived avoidable outcomes garner contempt, anger, blame, and resentment by activating the contemptuous model of stereotypic prejudices (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, Xu, 2002; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999).

In the present investigation, the Stereotype Content Model is postulated as a functional framework to explain levels not of prejudice on living outcomes (e.g. poverty), but of manipulated death outcomes. Unlike Fiske and colleagues’ model, which infers results utilizing living targets from information provided regarding personality and situation, our research extends the Stereotype Content Model framework to include dead targets, with the only information provided regarding their cause of death. We predict that the paternalistic prejudice model is activated for targeted individuals with no control over their death, specifically those who died via disease, accident, and murder. These causes of death elicit sympathy through the paternalistic prejudice subset of the Stereotype Content Model, and therefore result in higher ratings of admiration, sympathy, and respect and lower levels of death responsibility.

This prediction can be further supported through research displaying the underdog phenomena (Allison & Goethals, in press; Eylon & Allison, 2005; Allison & Eylon,
The appeal of the underdog lies in the archetypical Hollywood-portrayed American dream: reinvention and success despite negative past or present circumstances; underdogs illustrate the ability to succeed despite hardships and negative outcomes. Individuals facing challenges, especially a struggle beyond their control, elicit high levels of sympathy and appeal, and are rated significantly higher and more favorably than top dog counterparts (e.g. powerful individuals) regarding respect, sympathy, inspiration, and liking (Allison & Heilborn, 2007). The underdog effect was replicated when ratings of real and widely recognized underdog individuals were analyzed, such as Muhammad Ali, Oprah Winfrey, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and compared to top dogs media and political moguls, such as Bill Gates, George Bush, and Donald Trump (Allison & Heilborn).

The underdog effect postulates that underdogs engender sympathy from the struggle to overcome such negative conditions, regardless of actual perceived ability or competence. This engendered sympathy and appeal parallels the perceived struggle of individuals with negative, uncontrollable outcomes, either in life or in death, of the paternalistic evaluation and prejudices of the Stereotype Content Model. Although information regarding struggle, context, and uncontrollable negative outcomes results in the underdog phenomena (engendering sympathy and admiration), paternalistic prejudice can result from negative outcome alone (eliciting sympathy and pity). We argue that the Stereotype Content Model of paternalistic prejudice’s suggested sympathetic response mediates favorability ratings even when providing no context of individual deceased target, much like the posthumous impression formation found in evaluation of
photographs (Bering, McLeod, and Shackelford, 2005). Whereas the activation of paternalistic prejudice is believed to result in feelings of caretaking and sympathy (and thus resulting in high levels of death positivity bias), the contemptuous prejudice model yields anger, disgust, and blame (postulated as a function of perceived negative causes which were controllable or avoidable).

Contrarily, the Stereotype Content Model of contemptuous prejudice suggests that the affective responses of blame, resentment, and disgust resulting from negative controllable outcomes are byproducts of perceived and evaluated target immorality (Hirschberger, 2006; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, Xu, 2002; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999). In light of these results, we examine the activation of the contemptuous prejudice model for targets with control over their death, such as suicide victims. Regardless of perceived individual trait and personality immorality, cause of death itself, (e.g. suicide), harbors immoral and deviant overtones and results in negative, immoralistic judgments. In this regard, we postulate that death positivity bias is not activated for suicide victims regarding ratings of admiration, respect, and sympathy; however, ratings for suicide victims reflect high death responsibility and resentment.

As a possible merging of perceived responsibility and control over individual death, we additionally evaluate ratings for a martyred target. Although martyrdom implies control over negative outcomes (such as death), it does not elicit anger or resentment as a byproduct of immoral judgments and stereotypical contemptuous prejudice. Implications of the Stereotype Content Model and posthumous impression bias concerning martyrdom suggest that martyrs should elicit positive moral judgments
through sacrifice and pro-social behaviors (Allison & Goethals, in press). Martyrs make the ultimate sacrifice in an attempt to change or aid what they perceive as negative or harmful; thus, martyrs seem to elicit sympathy through many similar mechanisms to underdogs. More specifically, evaluations of martyrdom reflect higher ratings of sympathy despite perceived death responsibility, thus resulting in higher ratings of admiration and respect via positive posthumous impression formation.

Terror Management Theory

Stereotypes operate largely as a self-defense mechanism to protect and elevate the self in light of others and perceived threats; Terror Management Theory does the same. Whereas the Stereotype Content Model postulated sympathy and resentment as mediating variables in bias and evaluations, implications of Terror Management Theory suggest the interaction of terror and anxiety within bias, values, and judgment formation. Terror Management Theory posits human awareness of the self and inevitable mortality as the underlying framework which shapes conceptualized worldviews and subsequent judgments, particularly if morality is salient. Humans, unlike any other species, are uniquely aware of the self through abstract cognitive ability and self reflection; this ability, amongst other implications, results in the awareness of mortality and the certainty and unpredictability of death (Ronsenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). This fear is not a new philosophical rumination; for example, Greek philosopher Plato addressed this universal fear to Sophocles in The Apology when he remarked that "no one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils."
To alleviate the resulting fear and anxiety of mortality, individuals develop worldviews in which they are meaningful participants in an ordered and predictable universe (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997; Ronsenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon). Conscripting meaning can take many forms, such as belief in a greater power, (e.g. religion), or leaving a legacy through memoirs, monuments, or survival of progeny; however, defense mechanisms of validating the idea of an ordered and rational universe boost self-esteem and can be seen as features within every facet of Terror Management Theory.

Validation of an individual’s worldview is paramount, as it assuages the terror of death and mortality by eliciting a framework that provides significance and meaning; this validation leads to more favorable evaluation of those individuals who promote personalized values within the worldview and a consequent dislike for those who contradict or violate the individualized belief system (Allison & Goethals, in press; Hirschberger, 2006; Schimel et al., 2002; Ronsenblatt et al., 1989). These favorability and dislike bias for those who uphold or violate an individual’s cultural worldview is even more pronounced when mortality and death are made salient (e.g. when cause of death is addressed). Hirschberger (2006) evaluated both positive and negative evaluation bias and judgments after participants were exposed to death and mortality primes; results illustrated a moderating effect of participant similarity to the victim on compassion and sympathy scales. Those victims who were perceived as more similar to individual participants showed more positive and favorable ratings. The suggestion of similarity between victim and participant predicting increased favorable evaluations further
strengthens the theory of bias upon whether or not a target supported or violated worldviews.

This polarization of favorability and dislike considering individual worldview validation and contradiction resonates and functions much like Allison and Goethals’ theory of extremitization. Presumably, the theory of extremitization is applicable to circumstance, (e.g. circumstance regarding life and death), regardless of whether information is provided concerning individual target personality or context yet the present research does not directly investigate this effect. We posit that circumstance of death, for example manipulation of age of deceased independent of life circumstance, is adequate to reflect a violation of individual logical and predicable cultural worldview. Terror Management Theory further elucidates the importance of the component of logic through specification of personal, conceptualized worldview rationale: the belief in a “just world.” This individualized conceptualization of a “just world” illustrates order and meaning through providing relief and protection from “randomness and happenstance” (Schimel et al., 2002; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997).

The belief in a just world functions through Terror Management Theory by yielding order and presumed control. The conceptualization of a just world is further elucidated through the belief that the world is essentially a fair place in which others “get what they deserve” (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon). This rose-tinted view of karma-esque “what goes around comes around” creates a safe, inclusive environment of controllable and understandable circumstances (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon). When the theory of the just world is threatened, individuals consequently seek to “restore
justice” in the violated worldview through various behavioral and emotional reactions; these reactions range from behavioral interventions to judgments of blame or elevation bias regarding the target’s status and outcome (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon).

Whereas Terror Management Theory has focused on examination within many domains and the implications found concerning behavior and cognition, the primary objective has regarded investigation of differences within participant responses and characteristics. For example, gender or self-esteem differences in participant responses when examining the effects of death priming and mortality salience. Our research investigates the causes for differences in responses when manipulation is utilized within the actual target characteristics (e.g. the just world will be increasingly violated the younger a target is when he or she dies). The present research predicts that Terror Management Theory, specifically the belief in a “just world,” is violated upon manipulation of the age of a deceased target (cause of death unspecified).

The central prediction of Study 2 is that the younger a deceased target, the more the target’s death is seen as a violation of the just, ordered world cultivated through Terror Management Theory; thus target ratings regarding sympathy, admiration, liking, and respect increase, as well as subsequent lower ratings concerning death responsibility. (These ratings suggest a higher activation of positive posthumous bias). Additional ratings of injustice and tragedy are postulated to be significantly higher for younger targets. The death of a young individual is more unjust and illogical, violating the principles of meaning and order in the world. This difference within age at the time of death is possibly due to the lost potential, possible contributions, and significance
Posthumous Impression Formation (Allison & Eylon, 2004). These ratings reflect individual responses to the cultural worldview violation by an attempt to try to restore order and logic to the injustice of death of the young; thus, participants preserve their worldview and subsequently assuage the terror of mortality and unpredictability.

For the purpose of eliminating as many mediating variables as possible, for example individual attributes of the target or the cause of death, the deceased target’s age and location are the only information provided. We further postulate that targets who are older do not violate the “just world” element of Terror Management Theory (death of the old, in fact, lends further support to the cultural worldview of justice and order). More specifically, we argue that death of older targets show differences within elevated ratings of admiration, liking, and respect, and lowered death responsibility due solely to the age at the time of the death, and thus activation of posthumous impression formation through differing mechanisms. However, older deceased targets do not reflect high ratings of sympathy, as their death is postulated to advocate the “just world” worldview.

General Research Overview and Hypotheses

This study seeks to illustrate a more comprehensive investigation into the normative function, mechanisms, and consequences of posthumous impression formation, particularly death positivity biases. The underlying hypothesis of our research states that posthumous positive evaluations are mediated and predicted by sympathetic response and the association of death anxiety concerning age of death. Specifically, we investigate the role of sympathy as a mediator on cause of death utilizing the Stereotype
Content Model and the predicted prejudice resulting from affective evaluations of both controllable and uncontrollable negative outcome.

As shown in Figure 1, we argue that those targets seen as less responsible for their death activate a mediating sympathetic response (termed “paternalistic prejudice”) and result in higher ratings of liking, admiration, sympathy, and respect (and thus higher ratings of death positivity bias). This effect is postulated to be reflected primarily within the conditions of death via accident, disease, and murder; however, we additionally posit the effect of posthumous positive evaluations in ratings concerning martyrs, regardless of high perceived death responsibility. Unlike all other conditions, we predict martyrdom as rating high on all ratings of liking, admiration, sympathy, respect, and responsibility. Contrarily, those targets depicted as more responsible for their death activate the contemptuous prejudice model of stereotypes and result in lower ratings of liking, admiration, sympathy, and respect. Those targets evaluated as more responsible consequently reflect higher ratings of death responsibility and resentment, specifically those targets depicted as suicide victims. Specifically, those suicide victim targets, deemed more responsible and therefore less sympathetic, do not activate positive posthumous impression formation.

Our second hypothesis focuses on the age of the deceased and the interplay of the anxiety surrounding death and mortality as a result of Terror Management Theory. As shown in Figure 2, this second hypothesis posits the idea that deceased younger individuals violate the individualized worldview of a just, ordered world and therefore reflect higher ratings of admiration, liking, respect, sympathy, tragedy, and injustice.
Younger deceased targets also illustrate subsequent lower ratings of death responsibility. However, older deceased individuals not only confirm the idea of a just world thus ratings but also show an activation of posthumous elevation bias through differing mechanisms other than violation. Older targets, in fact, are proposed to reflect death positivity bias as a function of age alone.

Four ages are examined to elucidate age differences within deceased targets: 0, 16, 25, and 75. We predict that deceased target 0 years of age, (e.g. a newborn), reflects the largest effect of posthumous positive evaluations (reflected in very high ratings of admiration, liking, respect, sympathy, tragedy, and injustice), and the lowest levels of perceived death responsibility when compared to an alive, control newborn condition. Contrarily, deceased targets both 16 and 25 years of age suggest moderate positivity bias through increased ratings of sympathy, tragedy, and injustice as when compared to an alive control condition. However, teenaged and young adult deceased targets implies a recklessness, and thus reflect high levels of perceived death responsibility, and thus lower respect, liking, and admiration. All three conditions (newborn, teenaged, and young adult) illustrate a violation of the “just world” rationale of Terror Management Theory’s suggested individual personalized worldview. Additionally, we posit that those targets depicted as 75 years of age at the time of death show an effect of death positivity evaluations and bias (e.g. increased respect, admiration, and liking when compared to an alive control target) but through different mechanisms based entirely on age alone. The differing mechanism (e.g. positivity as a function of age alone) can be further elucidated by lower ratings of sympathy, tragedy, and injustice ratings upon the death of a 75-year-
old target. Death in older individuals do not show a violation of the "just world" theory, but, in fact, delineate support for an ordered, predictable universe.

The present research is the first to investigate the idea of perceived death responsibility (as a function of posthumous impression formation) regardless of content and persona of individual when examining sympathy as a mediator. Our focus on the manipulation of the age of the deceased target (e.g. target characteristics), rather than the differing participant characteristics when examining and evaluating a deceased target is also novel. We investigate our first hypothesis concerning death responsibility in Study 1 and our secondary hypothesis, which manipulates deceased target age, in Study 2. In both studies, participants read a short vignette which described an average female deceased target and provided one piece of information regarding either the cause of death (e.g. disease, Study 1) or the age at which the target died (e.g. 16 years at the time of death, Study 2). The simplicity of the design allows us to examine sympathy as a mediating mechanism on individual perceived death responsibility as well as the mediating variable of injustice on age of deceased separately of each other and singularly of confounding variables. Both of these separate variables allow for the examination of ratings of respect, admiration, sympathy, and death responsibility as well as consequential posthumous impression formation.
Study 1

Method

Participants and Design

The participants were 244 individuals, 108 males and 135 females, recruited through email via the StudyResponse project. Participants were compensated approximately $1 - $5 per participant online in a "direct payment" method utilized after the survey was completed. Preliminary research of StudyResponse has suggested higher response rates as an effect of incentive plan; for this reason, participants were also entered into a "raffle" for a larger monetary prize (approximately $50-100) provided through the StudyResponse service (StudyResponse Project, n.d.). Ages ranged from 20 to 79 years, $M = 44$ years of age.

The StudyResponse Project

The StudyResponse service is an online non-profit academic organization that facilitates scientific research by pairing researchers with a chosen adult population of registered participants via email recruitments. The StudyResponse project is hosted by Syracuse University and has assisted researchers in over 150 studies in the nation (StudyResponse Project, n.d.). Matching participants with researchers provides StudyResponse the ability to acquire and analyze characteristics of samples, such as demographics, across studies which yield high response rates; approximately 100,000 participants have registered with the StudyResponse Project (StudyResponse Project, n.d.). The online nature of this method of participant recruitment resulted in a large, varied sample of individuals over 18 within the United States.
Recruitment e-mails were sent to registered participants per Institutional Review Board guidelines which stated compensation rates, voluntary participation, and informed consent and debriefing mechanisms (Study Response Project, n.d.). The StudyResponse organization bills researchers accordingly in consideration of study design and configuration as well as recruitment methods.

Procedure and Materials

All participants were given a survey and asked to read six short vignettes describing six different women. After each individual vignette, participants were asked to rate how much they respected, admired, and liked the woman portrayed. The first summary described Lisa, an average woman currently living in Dallas, TX; this summary (alive, generic condition) served as a control for the remaining five.

The remaining five vignettes each describe another fictitious woman who died last month from varying causes of death. Each of the five read, “[target name] was an average woman who lived in [city, state]. Last month she died from [cause of death].” The city and state provided are target details are filler characteristics and were not used in analysis; these included Detroit, Michigan; Denver, Colorado; Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; and Santa Fe, New Mexico. City and state were varied to control for participant habituation while reading six different summaries of six different women; we controlled for differing location in analyses.

Causes of death ranged in responsibility and included: death via self-inflicted shotgun wound (suicide; personally responsible), murder by an intruder in the home (accident; not responsible), a car crash due to oncoming traffic (accident; not
responsible), leukemia (disease; not responsible), and starving for a cause (martyrdom; personally responsible). This procedure yielded a within-subjects design with analyses across one independent variable (e.g. cause of death).

**Dependent Measures**

Questions following each of the five death vignettes were the same as above (e.g. “how much do you [respect, admire, like] [target name]? ”); this set of questions was designed to measure the evaluative impressions of each woman. Included in each of the dead conditions was also a measure of perceived death responsibility, which asked, “how responsible to do think [target name] is for her death?” The measure of perceived responsibility also served as a manipulation check. Additional evaluative measures concerning resentment were analyzed for each condition, which read “how much do you resent [target name]?”. All participant ratings were measured on a 1 (signifying not at all) to 7 (signifying extremely) Likert scale. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and compensated.

**Study 2**

**Method**

**Participants and Design**

Participants were 96 students, 40 males and 56 females, recruited from a private university in the southeastern United States. Twenty-seven of these students participated in the present study for fulfillment of a course requirement; the remaining 69 were solicited throughout the campus and were compensated $5 per participant for their participation in a 10-minute experiment. Ages ranged from 18 to 22.
Procedure and Materials

Each participant was asked to read one short vignette describing a fictious woman. After each individual vignette, participants were asked to rate how much they respect, like, admire, and sympathize with the woman portrayed. Four of the eight conditions depicted a woman who is alive and read, “Lisa is an average, [age]-year-old woman. She currently lives in Dallas, Texas.” Each alive condition portrayed Lisa with four different years of age. Ages varied from young to old and were depicted as follows: 0 (newborn), 16, 25, and 75. These four alive conditions served as a control for the remaining four dead conditions. Dallas, Texas was chosen as a non-descriptive place located far away from the university subject pool for identification purposes, (e.g. replication of this experiment in the western part of the United States would seek non-descriptive cities located in the eastern United States as to not promote participant identification).

The remaining four conditions illustrated Lisa as recently deceased, (cause of death unspecified), and read, “Lisa was an average, [age]-year-old woman who lived in Dallas, Texas. Last month she died.” Four different targets, each with different years of age, were again analyzed within each condition: 0 (newborn), 16, 25, and 75 years of age. This procedure yielded a between-subjects 2 (condition: dead, alive) X 4 (age: 0, 16, 25, 75) design.

Dependent Measures

Questions following each of the four death vignettes were the same as above (e.g. “how much do you [respect, admire, and sympathize] with Lisa?”); this set of questions
was designed to measure the evaluative impressions of each woman as a function of age regardless of cause of death. Included in each of the dead conditions was also a measure of perceived death responsibility, which asked, "how responsible do you think Lisa is for her death?" Additionally, we included a measure of both perceived injustice and tragedy; these questions read, "how unjust is it that Lisa died?" and "how tragic is it that Lisa died?" The measures of perceived injustice and tragedy were averaged to function as one latent construct to measure mediation of Terror Management Theory's "just world" violation (see Figure 2 for an overall model). All participant ratings were measured on a 1 (signifying not at all) to 7 (signifying extremely) Likert scale. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and compensated.

Results

Study 1

Manipulation Check: Cause of Death on Responsibility

We hypothesized that participants would perceive targets as not responsible for causes of death which included accident, murder, and leukemia, whereas participants would perceive targets as responsible for causes of death by suicide or starvation for a political cause, (i.e. martyrdom). Mean averages for participant perceived responsibility of target were as follows: martyred target, (M = 6.12, SD = 1.45); suicide target, (M = 5.62, SD = 1.43); murdered target, (M = 2.33, SD = 1.48); accident target, (M = 1.93, SD = 1.44); and the leukemia target (M = 1.78, SD = 1.33).

To provide a manipulation check of responsibility on cause of death vignettes, we averaged responsibility ratings of both the martyr and suicide targets, (i.e. the responsible
target vignettes), as compared to the average of the murdered, accident, and martyred targets, (i.e. the not responsible target vignettes). A one-sample t-test was conducted comparing the two groups. Results revealed a significant difference of responsible and not responsible target ratings on cause of death, t(242) = 81.89, p < 0.001, (M = 5.87, SD = 1.11).

Cause of Death Effects on Evaluations

Causes of death include suicide, murder, accident, leukemia, and martyrdom. Participant perceived responsibility ratings for each cause of death were recoded into a trichotomous variable for subsequent analyses and are as follows: participant responsibility ratings of 1-3 were coded as “not responsible,” ratings of 4 were coded as “neutral,” and ratings of 5-7 were coded as “responsible.” See Table 1 for perceived responsibility rating means on target evaluatory measures for each cause of death.

Suicide

We first examined the effects of responsibility on participant’s evaluations of the suicide target. The multivariate analysis of variance, (MANOVA), revealed a statistically significant effect, F (8, 470) = 4.44, p < 0.001. Wilk’s Lambda scores were utilized to determine significance for all MANOVA calculations. Perceived responsibility had significant effects on participant’s ratings of liking, p < 0.05; respect, p < 0.001; and admiration, p < 0.001. However, perceived responsibility did not have a significant effect on ratings of resentment for the suicide target.

To determine whether there were differential effects of perceived responsibility ratings on participant evaluations of the deceased suicide target, separate analysis of
variances, (ANOVAs), were then conducted for each evaluative measure, (i.e. liking, respect, and admiration). Lastly, post hoc Bonferroni analyses were conducted to reveal group differences on each evaluative measure. Results revealed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target liking, $F(2, 240) = 3.38, p < 0.05$, such that participants who rated the suicide target as responsible for their death, ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.21$), liked the target significantly less than those participants who rated the target as neutrally responsible, ($M = 4.15, SD = 0.90$).

Analyses additionally revealed that participant perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target respect, $F(2, 240) = 11.14, p < 0.001$. Specifically, those participants who rated the suicide target as neutrally responsible for their death, ($M = 4.17, SD = 0.98$), respected the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.35$). Results further showed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target admiration, $F(2, 240) = 11.72, p < 0.001$. Those participants who rated the suicide target as neutrally responsible for their death, ($M = 3.77, SD = 1.24$), admired the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.30$). There were no significant differences on respect or admiration measures between participants who rated the suicide target as responsible or not responsible for their death.

**Murder**

We then examined the effects of responsibility on participant’s evaluations of the murdered target. The MANOVA again revealed a statistically significant effect, $F (8, 470) = 13.10, p < 0.001$. Perceived responsibility had significant effects on participant
ratings of liking, \( p < 0.001 \); respect, \( p < 0.005 \); admiration, \( p < 0.001 \); and resentment, \( p < 0.001 \).

To determine whether there were differential effects of perceived responsibility ratings on participant evaluations of the deceased murdered target, separate ANOVAs were then conducted for each evaluative measure, (i.e. liking, respect, admiration, and resentment). Post hoc Bonferroni analyses were again conducted to reveal group differences on each evaluative measure. Results revealed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target liking, \( F(2, 240) = 11.41, p < 0.001 \), such that participants who rated the murdered target as responsible for their death, \( (M = 5.41, SD = 1.37) \), liked the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, \( (M = 4.34, SD = 0.87) \), or neutrally responsible, \( (M = 4.15, SD = 0.51) \).

Analyses additionally revealed that participant perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target respect, \( F(2, 240) = 8.78, p < 0.001 \). Specifically, those participants who rated the murdered target as responsible for their death, \( (M = 5.25, SD = 1.54) \), respected the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, \( (M = 4.18, SD = 1.00) \), or neutrally responsible, \( (M = 3.94, SD = 0.72) \). Results further showed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target admiration, \( F(2, 240) = 13.52, p < 0.001 \). Those participants who rated the murdered target as responsible for their death, \( (M = 5.58, SD = 1.37) \), admired the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, \( (M = 4.40, SD = 0.95) \). Additionally, those participants who rated the target as either
responsible or not responsible for their death, admired the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target neutrally responsible, (M = 4.11, SD = 0.45).

However, results also revealed that participant perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target resentment, F(2, 240) = 42.39, p < 0.001. Specifically, those participants who rated the murdered target as responsible for their death, (M = 4.83, SD = 2.12), resented the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as neutrally responsible, (M = 2.79, SD = 1.45). Additionally, those participants who rated the target as either responsible or neutrally responsible for their death, resented the target significantly more than those who rated the target as not responsible, (M = 1.67, SD = 1.20).

**Accident**

We then examined the effect of responsibility on participant’s judgments of the deceased accident target. The MANOVA revealed a statistically significant effect, F (8, 470) = 13.27, p < 0.001. Perceived responsibility ratings had significant effects on liking, p < 0.005; respect, p < 0.005; admiration, p < 0.005; and resentment, p < 0.005.

To determine whether there were differential effects of perceived responsibility ratings on participant evaluations of the deceased accident target, separate ANOVAs were again conducted for each evaluative measure, (i.e. liking, respect, admiration, and resentment). Post hoc Bonferroni analyses were again conducted to reveal group differences on each evaluative measure. Results were remarkably similar to that of the murdered target. Results revealed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target liking, F(2, 240) = 5.92, p < 0.005, such that participants who rated the
accident target as responsible for their death, (M = 5.06, SD = 1.38), liked the target significantly *more* than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, (M = 4.35, SD = 0.84), or neutrally responsible, (M = 4.14, SD = 0.45).

Analyses additionally revealed that participant perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target respect, $F(2, 240) = 6.40, p < 0.005$. Specifically, those participants who rated the accident target as responsible for their death, (M = 5.06, SD = 1.48), respected the target significantly *more* than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, (M = 4.38, SD = 0.88), or neutrally responsible, (M = 4.03, SD = 0.33). Results further showed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target admiration, $F(2, 240) = 6.84, p < 0.005$. Those participants who rated the accident target as responsible for their death, (M = 5.06, SD = 1.27), admired the target significantly *more* than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, (M = 4.20, SD = 0.96), or neutrally responsible, (M = 4.00, SD = 0.39).

However, again mirroring the murdered target, results also revealed that participant perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target resentment, $F(2, 240) = 50.62, p < 0.001$. Specifically, those participants who rated the accident target as responsible for their death, (M = 4.26, SD = 2.37), resented the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as neutrally responsible, (M = 3.25, SD = 1.16). Additionally, those participants who rated the accident target as either responsible or neutrally responsible for their death, resented the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, (M = 1.56, SD = 1.13).
Leukemia

Additionally, we examined the effects of responsibility on the leukemia target. The MANOVA revealed a statistically significant effect, $F(8, 470) = 20.13, p < 0.001$. Perceived responsibility had significant effects on evaluations of liking, $p < 0.005$; respect, $p < 0.05$; admiration, $p < 0.05$; and resentment, $p < 0.001$.

To determine whether there were differential effects of perceived responsibility ratings on participant evaluations of the deceased leukemia target, separate ANOVAs were then conducted for each evaluative measure, (i.e. liking, respect, admiration, and resentment). Lastly, post hoc Bonferroni analyses were conducted to reveal group differences on each evaluative measure. Results were remarkably similar to both the murdered and accident targets. Results revealed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target liking, $F(2, 240) = 5.80, p < 0.005$, such that participants who rated the leukemia target as responsible for their death, ($M = 5.44, SD = 1.58$), liked the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, ($M = 4.42, SD = 0.90$), or neutrally responsible, ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.73$).

Analyses additionally revealed that participant perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target respect, $F(2, 240) = 5.48, p < 0.05$. Specifically, those participants who rated the leukemia target as responsible for their death, ($M = 5.55, SD = 1.42$), respected the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as neutrally responsible, ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.73$). There were no differences on respect evaluations for the leukemia target between participants who perceived the target to be responsible or not responsible for their death. Results further showed that perceived
responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target admiration, $F(2, 240) = 4.99, p < 0.05$. Those participants who rated the leukemia target as responsible for their death, ($M = 5.44, SD = 1.58$), admired the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.12$), or neutrally responsible, ($M = 4.22, SD = 0.76$).

However, again mirroring both the murdered and accident targets, results also revealed that participant perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target resentment, $F(2, 240) = 86.75, p < 0.001$. Specifically, those participants who rated the leukemia target as responsible for their death, ($M = 5.11, SD = 2.47$), resented the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as neutrally responsible, ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.27$), or not responsible, ($M = 1.39, SD = 0.94$).

**Martyr**

Lastly, we examined the effect of responsibility on the target who died for a political cause (e.g. the martyred target). The MANOVA revealed a statistically significant effect, $F(8, 470) = 2.13, p < 0.05$. Perceived responsibility had significant effects on evaluations of liking, $p < 0.05$; respect, $p < 0.05$; and admiration, $p < 0.005$. However, perceived responsibility did not have a significant effect on evaluations of resentment for the martyred target.

To determine whether there were differential effects of perceived responsibility ratings on participant evaluations of the deceased martyred target, separate ANOVAs were then conducted for each evaluative measure, (i.e. liking, respect, and admiration). We again conducted post hoc Bonferroni analyses to examine specific group differences
of evaluative measures. Results revealed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target liking, $F(2, 240) = 4.34$, $p < 0.05$, such that participants who rated the martyred target as neutrally responsible for their death, $(M = 4.16, SD = 0.70)$, liked the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, $(M = 3.61, SD = 1.89)$.

Analyses additionally revealed that participant perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target respect, $F(2, 240) = 3.55$, $p < 0.05$. Specifically, those participants who rated the martyred target as neutrally responsible for their death, $(M = 4.22, SD = 0.54)$, respected the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, $(M = 3.23, SD = 2.00)$. Results further showed that perceived responsibility ratings had a significant effect on target admiration, $F(2, 240) = 6.77$, $p < 0.005$. Those participants who rated the martyred target as neutrally responsible for their death, $(M = 4.22, SD = 0.80)$, admired the target significantly more than those participants who rated the target as not responsible, $(M = 2.92, SD = 1.80)$. There were no significant differences on liking, respect, or admiration evaluations between participants who perceived the martyred target as responsible or not responsible for their death.

*Meditation Effects of Sympathy*

Regardless of ratings of sympathy, death positivity bias (as based on participant evaluations of liking, admiration, and respect ratings) was not considered activated based upon participant perceived target responsibility for their death. Thus analysis of the mediating mechanism of sympathy on posthumous positivity bias was not conducted.
Study 2

Age of Deceased Effects on Evaluations

A MANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of age of the target at the time of death on participant evaluative impressions, (e.g. respect, admiration, and sympathy), for each deceased target. Ages examined were 0 (newborn), 16, 25, and 75.

The MANOVA revealed a statistically significant effect of age on participant’s evaluations of the deceased, F (12, 98.18) = 3.98, p < 0.001. Age of the deceased had a significant effect on target evaluations of sympathy, p < 0.05; and perceived target responsibility, p < 0.001. However, age of the deceased target did not have a significant effect on evaluative ratings of liking, admiration, or respect. See Table 2 for age of deceased target effects on participant sympathy and responsibility evaluations.

To determine whether there were differential effects of age on participant evaluations, separate ANOVAs were then conducted for both sympathy and perceived target responsibility. Post hoc Bonferroni analyses were conducted to reveal group differences on both evaluative measures. Results revealed that age had a significant effect on target sympathy, F(3, 44) = 3.15, p < 0.05. Specifically, participants rated the deceased 16-year-old target, (M = 5.83, SD = 1.46), significantly more sympathetic than the newborn target, (i.e. aged 0), (M = 5.41, SD = 1.62), or the 25-year-old target, (M = 5.00, SD = 1.95). Additionally, participants rated the deceased 75-year-old target, (M = 3.83, SD = 1.64), as significantly less sympathetic than all other deceased target ages.

Analyses also revealed that age had a significant effect on participant perceived target responsibility ratings, F(3, 44) = 11.39, p < 0.001. Participants rated the deceased
newborn target, (M = 1.08, SD = 0.28), as significantly less responsible for their death than all other deceased target ages. Additionally, participants rated the deceased 75-year-old target, (M = 2.00, SD = 1.27), as significantly less responsible than both the deceased 16-year-old target, (M = 3.83, SD = 1.02), and the deceased 25-year-old target, (M = 2.75, SD = 1.71).

Mediation Effects of Tragedy and Injustice

Regardless of ratings of tragedy and injustice, death positivity bias (as based on participant evaluations of respect, admiration, and sympathy) was not considered activated based upon age of the deceased. Thus analysis of the mediating mechanism of tragedy and injustice on posthumous positivity bias was not conducted.

Discussion Overview

"Because I could not stop for Death --
He kindly stopped for me --
The carriage held but just ourselves
And immortality."

--Emily Dickinson

The results of Study 1 do not support the hypothesis that positive posthumous evaluative biases are mediated by sympathetic responses when target perceived responsibility for cause of death is manipulated. Although the results of Study 1 show that participant perceived responsibility on target cause of death has significant effects upon selective evaluative measures, death positivity bias was not activated as an effect of
participant perceived low target responsibility. Similarly, the results of Study 2 do not suggest support for our second hypothesis, which states that posthumous impression formations are also mediated by feelings of injustice and tragedy upon manipulation of target age at the time of death. The results of Study 2 revealed that age of the deceased target had significant effects upon evaluative measures such as sympathy and responsibility; however, participant judgments concerning age at the time of death effects on posthumous positivity evaluations were not significant. We will now focus on a more detailed examination of the results of both studies.

General Discussion

The patterns across both studies do not suggest support for the mediation of sympathy or injustice on posthumous positive evaluations when target cause of death or deceased target age are manipulated. Although the results from Study 1 show significantly lower levels of perceived responsibility for those targets who died via accident, murder, and leukemia when compared to martyrdom or suicide targets, the results also suggested the inverse of our hypotheses: those participants who did believe the target was responsible for their death illustrated posthumous positivity biases. Participants who rated deceased accident, murdered, and leukemia targets as responsible also liked, admired, and respected the target more than those participants who rated them as not responsible for their death. Contrarily, participants who rated the accident, murdered, and leukemia targets as responsible also resented them more than those who rated them not responsible.
Vignettes depicting deceased suicide or martyred targets did show significantly higher levels of perceived responsibility when compared to death via accident, murder, or leukemia; however, follow-up analyses suggested no group differences between those who thought the target was responsible or not responsible on evaluative measures of liking, respect, and admiration. In fact, only those participants who rated both the suicide and martyred targets as neutrally responsible showed significance on liking, respect, and admiratory measures. Perceived responsibility had no effect on resentment for either target cause of death.

Age at the time of death had no effect on participant evaluatory measures; however, age of the deceased did have significant effects on both target responsibility and sympathy measures (Study 2). Supporting our hypotheses, participants perceived newborns, (aged 0), as the least responsible for their deaths, followed by the 75-year-old target. Targets deceased at the age of 16 and 25 were perceived the most responsible and did not differ from each other on participant perceived responsibility ratings. Inconsistent with our assertion that newborns, viewed as the least responsible and thus the most tragically deceased, were rated less sympathetic than 16-year-old and 25-year-old target deceased targets. 75-year-old deceased targets were viewed as the least sympathetic, per our predictions.

Agency and Identification?

Our primary aim in the present research was to test the hypotheses that death positivity bias was mediated and predicted by engendered sympathy when cause of death perceived responsibility was manipulated, (Study 1), and injustice when age of the
Posthumous Impression Formation 41

deceased was manipulated (Study 2). The function of both paternalistic prejudice and contemptuous prejudice as elucidated in the Stereotype Content Model was postulated as a framework to explain heightened or lowered evaluatory measures on cause of death. Study 2 merged ideas postulated by Terror Management Theory and participant personalized beliefs in a “just world” to identify possible target age conditions and processes under which positivity bias might arise. Yet neither study supported our hypotheses of the mediation effects on death positivity biases. There are several possible alternate conclusions that might further explain our contradictory findings across both studies.

Positivity bias was not evident as an effect of lower participant perceived responsibility for cause of death in Study 1; however, it was evident in those participants who rated the target as highly responsible. Earlier we paralleled the postulations and effects of the Stereotype Content Model with research regarding the underdog phenomenon. We hypothesized that underdogs, who have been shown to consistently produce sympathy and pity, and thus higher levels of positivity bias, would function similar to those individuals possessing negative and uncontrollable outcomes consequently engendering pity and sympathy via the paternalistic prejudice subset of the Stereotype Content Model (Allison & Goethals, in press; Elyon & Allison, 2005; Allison & Eylon, 2004). We further posited that targets who engendered paternalistic prejudice in participant responses would also result in death positivity biases through sympathy via our manipulation responsibility for cause of death, (i.e. accident, murder, and leukemia targets). Yet positivity biases were evident in those participants who thought the
accident, murdered, and leukemia target were responsible. A further illustration of the underdog effect may shed light into our inconclusive findings.

Markus, McGuire, Allison, and Elyon (2004) narrowed the underdog effect on individual positivity biases by illustrating certain conditions in which the underdog is not supported: if the target is illustrated as too much an underdog, (e.g. a five- or ten-percent chance of winning over the competition), or if the target is portrayed at marginal underdog status, (e.g. a fifty-percent chance of winning over the competitors). Perhaps our target vignettes of accident, murder, and leukemia fell into the five- or ten-percent subset of underdog extremitization and dislike. This explanation which would lend support to the results of increased participant sympathetic evaluations as well as positivity biases evident only if the participants believed the target to be responsible. These evaluations of dislike on either end of the underdog spectrum seem to suggest an element of target agency within death effects on posthumous positivity evaluations.

There were no differences in posthumous bias measures between groups who perceived the suicide or martyred targets as responsible or not responsible. Our hypotheses regarding highly responsible target deaths focused on the predictions of the Stereotype Content Model’s contemptuous prejudice subset, which claims that individuals in control of their negative outcomes elicit resentment and contempt. This prejudice was not extended to our targets who died via suicide or martyrdom; participants felt no resentment toward the target based on their cause of death. It is possible that the contemptuous prejudice model was not activated upon controllable negative target deaths and is only applicable to living circumstances. This conclusion would, in fact, support
the central premise of posthumous bias in the most general form: we think better of the dead, regardless of their negative endings, much more so than those who are living negative or immoral lives (Allison & Eylon, 2004).

Although Study 2 revealed significant evaluations of responsibility and sympathy upon manipulation of the age at the time of death, results suggested no evidence of participant posthumous positivity biases. Responsibility effects of age of the deceased supported our hypotheses, yet sympathetic effects were inconclusive. Our results could be evident of problematic and non-representative participant sampling methodology. Participants were comprised of 18-22 year-old university-enrolled college students who likely associated and identified more strongly with the younger targets, (i.e. 16 and 25 years of age), rather than the deceased newborn target. Stronger identification from a non-representative sample could have mediated the effects of sympathy upon age manipulated targets. This conclusion would, in fact, support the results of deceased targets of 16 and 25 rating significantly higher in responsibility and sympathy when compared to both the newborn and older deceased targets. Problematic participant sampling methods will be further discussed next in research and methodology limitations.

Limitations and Strengths

The present research possesses several limitations, some of which could be the basis of our inconclusive results, which should be considered when interpreting the findings. For example, as previously mentioned, our sample in Study 2 included only university-enrolled students in the Southeastern United States; therefore results should be generalized with caution to differing populations. The results of Study 2 are most likely a
derivative of the sample itself, such that college-aged pooled participants likely identified both the 16- and 25-year-old deceased target much more so than the newborn target, and thus rated the 16- and 25-year old targets much higher on sympathy scales regardless of perceived responsibility ratings.

The use of the StudyResponse Project to generate the population for Study 1 yields a more representative sample of the population at large in the United States. Participants are recruited via email and thus located throughout the nation; ages spanned from 20 to 79. Conversely, StudyResponse also yields an over-representative sample of college-educated participants, (i.e. averaged education level is 2 years of college) (StudyResponse Project, n.d.). Additionally, participants must have access to and skills for computer and internet usage. However, the use of StudyResponse generated a large, relatively diverse sample accessible for data collection.

Second, our within-subject design utilized in Study 1 results in a high dependency of data responses for each cause of death. Although the manipulation check of participant perceived target responsibility comparing the differing causes of death suggested adequate cause of death responsibility manipulation, responsibility as a variable was collapsed and recoded into a trichotomous independent variable for MANOVA analysis and interpretation. Recoding a Likert scale variable into a trichotomous variable loses variability within the data itself and increases error within results, often resulting in false positives. Additionally, our results showed differences within categories of cause of death, (e.g. suicide as compared with martyr), and not categories of responsibility, (e.g. responsible or not, as per our mediation check).
Lastly, the present research utilized self-report measures for all participant evaluations and perceptions in both Study 1 and Study 2. Although self-report measures are widely used and accepted as valid assessments throughout psychology research, if at all possible, behavioral and naturalistic assessments of generated posthumous impression formation would have been more adequate and reliable. However, opportunities to analyze behavioral or naturalistic measures of posthumous positivity bias for average or unknown targets, (as compared to deceased celebrities or former presidents), on large participant samples would be extremely difficult.

There are several strengths of the present research to consider as well. First, the present studies are the first to investigate cause of death perceived responsibility effects on posthumous impression formation literature; the examination of the age of the deceased effects upon positivity bias is also novel. The manipulation of target characteristics, (i.e. cause of death and age), rather than the analysis of participant characteristics allowed for a more inclusive illustration into the normative functions of posthumous impression evaluations, particularly those conditions under which death positivity judgments do – and do not – arise.

In consideration of the target characteristic manipulation, the adaptation of our vignettes to provide only information solely relevant to the target’s cause of death or age functioned to eliminate as many other mediating variables as possible. Previous research has normally provided filler characteristics regarding random target information, (e.g. occupation or target attributes), which does not elucidate the specific target conditions under which positivity bias might arise (Allison & Goethals; Allison & Heilborn; Allison
& Elyon). Although this elimination did not provide participant engendered positivity bias, and thus subsequent exploration of the possible mediating mechanisms of sympathy, (Study 1), and injustice, (Study 2), were not investigated, this could be the derivative of weaknesses identified earlier. Future research could further our understanding of the function and prediction of posthumous positivity biases.

Implications for Future Research of Posthumous Impression Formation

In the last ten years, research regarding posthumous impression formation has abounded; the current findings have several implications for further research areas. To our knowledge, the present research is the first to examine target attributes on posthumous evaluations. Although our analysis of cause of death in Study 1 revealed results inconclusive to our specific postulations, the results suggested a probable inverse relationship, possibly due to participant inferred agency similar to that found in the underdog phenomenon. Research continues to elucidate not only the numerous mechanisms under which the underdog phenomenon occurs, but also those evaluations that are formed due to the target condition. A promising area of future posthumous impression formation could strive to merge both the underdog effect with participant judgments of deceased targets. We propose that, if controlling for participant perception of target attributions, (e.g. agency), posthumous positivity bias would be more clearly evident (and predictable) in individual evaluations. Participant engendered contempt and resentment of responsible immoral deaths was not suggested in analyses, yet other
mediating mechanisms on evaluatory biases provide a rich area of exploration for future analyses.

Another future research implication would expand knowledge concerning additional moderating variables that identify posthumous impression formation effects. Although our postulation of manipulated age effects on participant biases was not supported in our specific participant sample, we propose a more representative population would prove otherwise. Additional moderating variables to explore include target manipulated gender, religious affiliation, or ethnicity.

Conclusion

Previous research has suggested that death positivity is a universal cultural bias robustly spanning history into modern day society; these biases are thought to serve a normative function of honoring the dead (Allison & Eylon). The present research aimed to merge theories of prejudice resulting from individual morality and responsibility in life to those in death through subsequent evaluations of posthumous biases (Study 1). We also attempted to encompass theoretical implications of Terror Management Theory postulations of injustice and tragedy to deceased younger individuals, proposing significantly higher posthumous evaluatory judgments. Although the results of both studies were inconclusive regarding support for our specified hypotheses, they portray important boundary conditions for the effects death positivity biases and further our understanding of possible mechanisms underlying posthumous impression formation for future research considerations and implications.
References


Schimel, J., Simon., L., Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., Waxmonsky, J., &


1Table 1

*Participant Perceived Responsibility Rating Effects on Target Evaluations*

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<td>0.98</td>
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<td>0.45</td>
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<td>2.63</td>
<td>5.41*</td>
<td>5.25*</td>
<td>5.58*</td>
<td>4.83*</td>
<td>5.06*</td>
<td>5.06*</td>
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<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>2.37</td>
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</table>

*Significant differences between groups.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
<th>Leukemia</th>
<th>Martyr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Not Responsible</td>
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<td>4.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrally</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>5.44*</td>
<td>5.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant differences between groups.

1

Table 1

Participant Perceived Responsibility Rating Effects on Target Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
<th>Leukemia</th>
<th>Martyr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Responsible</td>
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<td>4.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>1.07</td>
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<td>Neutrally</td>
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<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>5.44*</td>
<td>5.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*Significant differences between groups.
Table 2

*Age of Deceased Effects on Target Evaluations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age at Death</th>
<th>Sympathy M(SD)</th>
<th>Responsibility M(SD)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 Years</td>
<td>5.41 1.62</td>
<td>1.08 0.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 Years</td>
<td>5.83 1.46</td>
<td>3.83 1.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>25 Years</td>
<td>5.00 1.95</td>
<td>2.75 1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 Years</td>
<td>3.83 1.64</td>
<td>2.00 1.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Model of activated death positivity bias evaluations, mediated by the paternalistic prejudice model, (e.g. sympathy), upon those targets perceived as less responsible for their death.

*Figure 2.* Model of activated death positivity bias evaluations, mediated by the latent construct of “just world,” (e.g. injustice, tragedy), upon targets younger at the time of death.
Cause of Death: Disease, Murder, Accident → Decreased Perceived Death Responsibility → Death Positivity Bias → Sympathetic Response

(-) (-) (+)
EDUCATION

University of Richmond, Virginia
Masters of Arts, Psychology, 2008

Honors: Psi Chi (National Honor Society in Psychology)
GPA: 3.80
Activities: Teaching Assistantship
Independent Research in Posthumous Impression Formation

University of California, Santa Barbara
Bachelor of Arts, English, 2005
Bachelor of Arts, Psychology, 2005

Honors: Dean’s List 2003, 2004, 2005
Golden Key International Honor Society
Psi Chi
Activities: Research Assistant in the Research Center for Virtual Environments and Behaviors (RECVEB)

Charles W. Flanagan High School, Pembroke Pines, Florida
High School Diploma, 2000

Honors: Honor Roll
National Honor Society
Advanced Placement in Art, Economics, English, Physics, and Calculus
Activities: Vice President, Art Club
Spanish Club
Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD)

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Social Psychology Department, Graduate Studies
University of Richmond, Virginia
(I have researched, analyzed, proposed, and defended a thesis regarding the social psychology phenomena of Posthumous Impression Formation. Publication is currently in process. Submitted May 8, 2008.)
American Men's Studies Association
Annual Conference 2008
Presentation April 2008
(Entitled, "The Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity in Ballroom Dancing Movies."
Manuscript in press for publication, coauthored.)

Research Center for Virtual Environments and Behavior University of California, Santa Barbara Research Assistant (805) 893-5798
(Included entering data, running research participants through experiments, assisting with the development of virtual simulations for new studies, and testing new computer programs.)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Teaching Assistantship, University of Richmond January 2008-May 2008
(Included teaching the lab which accompanied the 300-level Abnormal Psychology/Psychopathology lecture. Duties encompass formulating lectures, tests, activities, homework, grading, proctoring, and organization of the University-affiliated website, Blackboard, for undergraduate sophomore and junior students.)

Teaching Assistantship, University of Richmond August 2007-December 2007
(Included teaching the lab which accompanied the 200-level Statistics and Research Methods psychology lecture. Duties encompass formulating lectures, tests, activities, homework, grading, proctoring, and organization of the University-affiliated website, Blackboard, for undergraduate freshman and sophomore students.)

Teaching Assistantship, University of Richmond August 2006-May 2007
(Included teaching the lab which accompanied the 200-level Statistics and Research Methods psychology lecture. Duties encompass formulating lectures, tests, activities, homework, grading, proctoring, and organization of the University-affiliated website, Blackboard, for undergraduate freshman and sophomore students.)

Vacation Bible School, Colonial Heights, Virginia August, 1996-1999
Volunteer Teacher Assistant, Recreational Aide
(Included assisting teaching day classes and aiding with projects which focused on creating an environment which fostered a strong sense of spirituality and community for children ages 5-12 years.)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
Virginia Office for Protection and Advocacy (VOPA) August 2007-present
Intern (804)225-2045
(I currently work in the Institutions Department and am involved in various research and cases both advocating and legally representing individuals with disabilities within the state prison and mental and geriatric hospital systems. Various case goals include eliminating abuse, neglect, and discrimination, aiding in the provision of treatment and services, and correct placement of individuals within the hospitals and/or community.)
Peri & Alvarado, CPAs, Santa Barbara, California  
Runner  (805)563-1049  
(Featured dealing directly with clients, and organization and data entry of files and company projects.)

UNDERGRADUATE WORK EXPERIENCE

Bebe, San Diego, California  
Sales Associate  (619)233-6003  
July-September 2005

Express, Bonita, California  
Sales Associate  (619)267-4647  
July-August 2003

Gap, San Diego, California  
Sales Associate  (619)297-8292  
July-November 2002

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Petersburg, Virginia  
Intern/Volunteer  (804)862-1100  
April 2006