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The Death Positivity Bias: Robustness and Explanations

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Abstract

The death positivity bias (DPB) refers to the tendency to evaluate deceased individuals more favourably than otherwise identical living ones. Although the DPB is established in the case of public figures (e.g., celebrities, politicians), it is not clear it emerges in the case of lay persons. In addition, its robustness, domain specificity, and underlying mechanisms are poorly understood. In this thesis, I tested the DPB across seven experiments in reference to lay, unfamiliar targets described in neutral or ambiguous terms. I assessed the DPB in terms of trait impressions. Further, I analysed these trait impressions within a domain-based framework of person perception: Sociability (warmth, liking), Morality (morality, respect), and Competence (competence). In Experiment 1, I found no evidence for the DPB when the target vignette was descriptively neutral. In Experiment 2, I introduced evaluative ambiguity and obtained evidence for the DPB: deceased targets were rated higher on respect. In Experiments 3 and 4, I examined whether the DPB is moderated by group membership. The DPB emerged on morality (Experiment 4), respect (Experiments 3 and 4), and an overall composite of the measured traits (Experiment 4), but was unmoderated by ingroup–outgroup status, that is, it emerged even when the target was a member of a politically disfavoured and socially distant outgroup. In Experiments 5 to 7, I addressed mechanisms underlying the DPB. It was unmoderated by measured norm endorsement (i.e., individual agreement with the idea that the dead should be treated respectfully; Experiment 5) and by manipulated norm framing (i.e., whether respectful treatment was socially enforced or criticised; Experiment 6). In Experiment 7, status (deceased vs. living) produced robust main effects across outcomes in an audience-framing paradigm; the Status × Audience interaction did not survive familywise error control, and the manipulation likely introduced additional social-information cues about the target. Finally, in a mini meta-analysis, the DPB was most reliable in the Morality domain, followed by Sociability, and then Competence. Taken together, the DPB is observed among lay persons and is selective by domain; ambiguity remains a plausible enabling condition (not experimentally isolated here), and communicative context does not provide a confirmed causal moderator once social information confounds are considered.

Keywords: death positivity bias, person perception, sociability, morality, competence, communication goals

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Research Problems and Project Rationale: An Overview

In this thesis, I investigate the death positivity bias (DPB), defined as the tendency to evaluate deceased individuals more favourably than otherwise identical living ones. I address three core questions. First, how robust and selective is the DPB across domains of person perception—Sociability, Morality, and Competence? Second, does the DPB generalise across varied evaluative contexts and types of social targets—especially to individuals who are both *lay* and *unfamiliar*? Prior research has examined either lay figures who held high-status roles (e.g., Sullivan as a CEO in Allison & Eylon, 2005) or familiar figures with personal or public visibility (e.g., Hayes, 2016), but no study has tested whether the DPB arises when both features are absent. And third, why does the DPB arise? My research directly addresses these gaps. I test the DPB across seven experiments. In Experiments 1–2, I examine whether the bias occurs when evaluating unfamiliar targets described in neutral (Experiment 1) or ambiguous (Experiment 2) terms, exploring whether interpretive latitude might enable the DPB (not experimentally contrasted here) in lay, unfamiliar targets. I then test whether group membership moderates the DPB (Experiments 3–4). In Experiments 5–7, I investigate potential mechanisms, focusing on norm endorsement, norm framing, and communicative context. Experiment 7 produced robust main effects of status across outcomes in an audience-framing paradigm; the Status × Audience interaction did not survive familywise error control, and the manipulation likely introduced additional social-information cues about the target. Thus, the study shows persistence of the DPB under audience framing rather than causal moderation by audience. Finally, I conduct a mini meta-analysis to assess the overall strength and consistency of the DPB, comparing its expression across interpersonal domains and individual traits.

My research advances person perception theory, the foundation of social cognition (Fiske et al., 2007; Quinn et al., 2007; Trope & Gaunt, 2007), in several ways. It delivers the most statistically robust test of the DPB to date, relying on high-powered samples (Table 1). It shifts focus from famous or high-status figures to lay, unfamiliar targets, using evaluatively ambiguous descriptions that approximate the uncertainty typical of everyday social inference. It also introduces a domain-based framework for measuring posthumous impressions, allowing results to be systematically organised across Sociability, Morality, and Competence. Next, I review the literature, outline the research problem, and present the rationale for the experiments that follow.

Literature Review

"Do not speak ill of the dead" is a long-standing aphorism that captures the pervasive social taboo against speaking negatively of those who have died. Its earliest known formulation appears in *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius, written in the 4th century AD. Laertius (1853) attributes the phrase "tòn tethnekóta mè kakologeîn" to Chilon of Sparta, one of the Seven Sages of Greece (p. 33). The principle, though first codified in Ancient Greek thought, echoes a much older human tendency to treat the dead with reverence.

According to archaeological evidence, this tendency predates written history. Neanderthal burials at Shanidar Cave, interpreted as involving floral offerings, indicate that symbolic treatment of the dead dates back to the Middle Palaeolithic (Pomeroy et al., 2020). These practices, preceding Homo sapiens, imply an evolutionary continuity in how hominins assigned social meaning and status to the dead. Whether such rituals served emotional, social, or proto-religious functions, they reflect an early inclination to honour the dead as socially significant beings.

This reverence remains deeply embedded in contemporary culture. Funeral rites often prioritise honour over honesty, and praise over critique. Eulogies—derived from the Greek *eulogia*, meaning 'blessing'—are structured to extol the dead, omitting faults or softening transgressions. Obituaries follow suit, framing lives through selective celebration rather than critical review (Hume, 2021). As Kunkel and Dennis (2003) observed, modern funerals are not merely venues for remembrance but are rhetorically structured to provide consolation. Analysing five contemporary eulogies from public and private settings, these authors identified a shared thematic architecture built around idealisation, narrative coherence, and affective uplift. Speakers reframed minor flaws as endearing quirks and omitted more serious transgressions entirely. The purpose of these rhetorical choices, the authors argued, was not only to honour the dead but to stabilise the bereaved, affirming emotional bonds, sustaining collective identity, and managing grief. Dysology, the rhetorical condemnation of the deceased, was conspicuously absent. This absence, they concluded, reflected a powerful normative template that prescribes reverent remembrance, even in cases where the deceased's moral record was equivocal.

This enduring positivity toward the dead may be rooted in social norms that frame the dead as off-limits to reproach. Just as respect for the elderly or the vulnerable is normatively encouraged, speaking ill of the dead may breach expectations of decency and restraint. These norms do not merely guide ceremonial behaviour but also shape everyday evaluations, prompting favourability independently of the target's traits or actions. As Walter (1996) argues,

modern grief practices often centre not on emotional detachment but on constructing a coherent and enduring narrative of the deceased. Through eulogies, conversation, and shared recollection, the living integrate the dead into ongoing identity projects: affirming meaning, preserving continuity, and reinforcing moral bonds.

Beyond universal tendencies, death is evaluated through culturally embedded scripts that shape what is sayable, praiseworthy, or taboo. Cultural psychology highlights variation in independence–interdependence and tightness–looseness, which can calibrate norms around criticism, reverence, and public remembrance (Gelfand et al., 2011; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Work on collective and cultural memory likewise shows that commemoration practices structure posthumous moralisation (Assmann, 2011; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Under this view, the DPB observed here reflects a psychological pattern within a UK cultural context—plausibly strengthened where mourning is ritualised or negative speech is normatively constrained, and weakened where pluralistic memory tolerates critique. This motivates cross-cultural tests that manipulate death scripts (e.g., ritualised mourning vs. secular obituary frames) and norm expectations about praise versus critique, which I flag in the thesis limitations and future directions.

Although thanatology and cultural psychology have considered the moral and social standing of the dead—for example, in debates about posthumous harm, legacy, and commemoration—psychological science has not prioritised the empirical study of how knowledge of a person's death alters perceptions of them. I address this gap. Specifically, I test whether perceivers evaluate dead individuals more positively than living ones, why this bias occurs, and under what circumstances. Before turning to empirical evidence, I review the literature on person perception, which provides the conceptual framework for my thesis.

Person Perception: Theory and Mechanisms

Domains: Sociability, Morality, Competence

Research on person perception identifies three core domains along which individuals evaluate others: Sociability, Morality, and Competence. These domains guide impression formation by addressing distinct social questions: Is this person likeable? Are they good? Are they capable? Each domain contributes uniquely to how perceivers judge character, anticipate behaviour, and decide how to interact.

Throughout this thesis, Domains (capitalised) denote theoretical dimensions: Sociability, Morality, Competence. Traits are measured indicators of a Domain (e.g., warmth and liking for Sociability; morality and respect for Morality; competence for Competence). Items are the observed statements (typically 3–4 per trait) rated on 1–7 scales. Trait scores are

the mean of their items (reliabilities reported in Methods/Appendix). When reported, Domain scores are the mean of their constituent trait scores; if a Domain is represented by a single trait in a given experiment (e.g., Sociability in Experiments 1–3), the Domain score equals that trait.

Sociability refers to the domain of person perception concerned with a target's interpersonal responsiveness and approachability, and is typically indexed through trait assessments such as warmth and likeability. It reflects the perceived intention to be kind, cooperative, and well-meaning—traits that are evolutionarily and socially central to affiliation and coalition-building. According to Cuddy et al. (2008), warmth judgements precede and outweigh competence assessments in impression formation, because they address the perceiver's fundamental concern: whether the target intends harm or help. This domain includes attributes such as kindness, sincerity, and emotional expressiveness, and often serves as the default basis for approach or avoidance decisions. Although warmth is sometimes conflated with morality, the two domains are theoretically distinct. Sociability refers to interpersonal responsiveness, not ethical conduct; it is possible to be warm but morally dubious, or cold but ethically principled. Perceivers rely on sociability cues to gauge likeability, social ease, and emotional accessibility—particularly in contexts requiring interpersonal harmony, such as team-based environments or close relationships.

As mentioned above, warmth may often be considered the primary dimension of social perception (Cuddy et al., 2008), but this construct typically conflates Sociability and Morality. Recent work has sought to disentangle these domains, revealing that they operate as theoretically and functionally distinct. Brambilla et al. (2011) and Goodwin (2015) demonstrated that Morality, not Sociability, exerts the stronger influence on global impression formation and interpersonal trust. Whereas sociability cues shape perceptions of likeability and interpersonal fluency, moral appraisals anchor reputation and guide evaluative asymmetries, particularly under conditions of ambiguity or risk. As such, earlier claims about the primacy of warmth must be interpreted with caution: it is the moral core of warmth, rather than affective friendliness, that drives its importance. Here, I treat Sociability and Morality as separate evaluative domains. This structure reflects both the most up-to-date empirical findings and the need to isolate their respective contributions to posthumous impression formation.

Morality refers to perceived intent and adherence to socially shared ethical standards. It encompasses traits such as honesty, sincerity, fairness, and respect (Goodwin, 2015). Although traditionally viewed as one component of broader "Sociability" judgements, evidence suggests that Morality operates as a distinct and privileged domain in person perception

(Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007). Indeed, moral traits guide global impressions more strongly than either Sociability or Competence traits (Wojciszke et al., 1998). This dominance reflects both functional and motivational priorities. From a functional perspective, Morality signals whether others are trustworthy and well-intentioned, thus enabling perceivers to avoid social threats and facilitate cooperative relations (Brambilla et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2007). From a motivational perspective, individuals are more interested in detecting moral character than other traits when forming first impressions, particularly under conditions of uncertainty or risk (Brambilla et al., 2011).

Experimental evidence shows that perceivers actively seek moral information in asymmetric ways. When judging Morality, individuals adopt disconfirmatory strategies, preferring questions that would falsify rather than confirm moral goodness (Brambilla et al., 2011). This reflects the hierarchical structure of moral trait attribution: a single transgression is often sufficient to overturn an otherwise positive judgement, whereas isolated good acts rarely redeem a morally suspect target (Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Trafimow & Trafimow, 1999). As a result, moral violations exert disproportionate weight in impression formation, even when other traits are held constant. Moral evaluations also resist revision, guiding reputation and trust in both individual and group contexts (Goodwin, 2015). In this way, Morality functions not simply as a dimension of warmth but as the primary lens through which perceivers infer character and intent.

Competence refers to perceived ability to achieve instrumental goals. It encompasses traits such as intelligence, efficacy, diligence, and skill (Fiske et al., 2002). Evaluations of Competence are critical in contexts that prioritise performance, decision-making, or leadership, as these contexts shape expectations about whether a target can deliver desirable outcomes. Although Competence often elicits respect and admiration, it does not necessarily evoke trust or liking unless paired with moral or prosocial intent. A capable individual who lacks perceived goodwill may be viewed as efficient but dangerous, exemplifying the “Competent but cold” quadrant of the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002).

Unlike Sociability and Morality, which govern interpersonal affinity and ethical standing, Competence informs judgements of efficacy. These judgements are context-sensitive: their salience increases when stakes are high, goals are clear, or responsibilities are assigned. For instance, in workplace or leadership settings, competence takes on greater evaluative weight, often serving as a gatekeeping trait for roles requiring authority or expertise. However, research suggests that Competence appraisals may suffer from ceiling effects in everyday person perception. When target information is sparse or evaluatively ambiguous, Competence may be

harder to infer, yielding muted or unstable trait attributions. Moreover, as Competence does not carry the same moral charge as other domains, it may be underweighted in reputation formation unless specifically foregrounded.

Together, these three domains—Sociability, Morality, Competence—form the structural foundation of person perception. Each addresses a distinct function: Sociability regulates affiliation, Morality governs trust and ethical regard, and Competence informs expectations of efficacy and performance. In this thesis, I use these domains to organise evaluations of deceased and living, enabling a domain-level analysis of the DPB. Because Competence is typically less emotionally charged and more dependent on situational cues than Sociability or Morality, it may be less responsive to changes in evaluative tone brought about by a target's death. I therefore treat Competence not only as a core evaluative dimension, but also as a theoretically informative contrast, one that may reveal whether the DPB operates as a general halo or a selectively moralising tendency. This framework allows for precise identification of where the DPB emerges, how strongly it manifests, and what psychological mechanisms underlie it.

Theoretical Models: Stereotype Content, Moral Primacy, and Motivated Perception

Several theoretical models explain how perceivers evaluate others across the domains of Sociability, Morality, and Competence.[1] These models clarify which domains dominate impression formation and why certain domains exert greater weight under specific conditions. An influential model is the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002), which proposes that social perceptions are primarily organised along two dimensions: warmth and competence. Warmth refers to perceived friendliness, sincerity, and intent, and closely maps onto the Sociability domain. Competence encompasses perceived ability, skill, and effectiveness, aligning with evaluations of performance and status. According to the Stereotype Content Model, warmth is judged before competence and carries greater motivational weight in determining approach–avoidance behaviour, as it signals the target's intentions toward the perceiver. This precedence reflects evolutionary and social concerns: before determining whether someone can enact their goals, one must assess whether they mean to help or harm.

Although originally developed to explain group stereotypes, the Stereotype Content Model generalises to individual-level perception (Fiske et al., 2002), where warmth and competence function as foundational anchors. Distinct combinations of the two yield unique affective responses: high-warmth, low-competence targets elicit pity; high-competence, low-

[1] I capitalise Sociability, Morality, and Competence when referring to the three evaluative domains; lower-case is used for trait usage.

warmth targets evoke envy. These mixed stereotypes are functionally consistent and psychologically stable, allowing perceivers to resolve seemingly contradictory evaluations (e.g., seeing someone as competent yet untrustworthy).

While the SCM remains foundational, subsequent work extends and refines its content structure. Beyond the classic warmth–competence split, two lines of research sharpen social evaluation. First, the ABC model partitions group stereotypes into Agency/socioeconomic success, Beliefs (conservative–progressive ideology), and Communion (prosociality), showing that ideological belief content forms a dimension independent of communion/warmth (Koch et al. 2016). Second, studies separate Morality from Sociability within "warmth," with Morality (honesty, fairness) more central than friendly approachability for global impressions (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Goodwin, 2015). Because the vignettes contained no ideological content, I did not model Beliefs as a fourth dimension; instead, I focus on Sociability, Morality, and Competence, which correspond most closely to Communion (affiliative approachability), ethical character, and Agency (instrumental ability), respectively. Sociability and Morality both signal prosociality yet differ in focus—Sociability concerns emotional accessibility and interpersonal approachability (e.g., friendliness, likeability), whereas Morality concerns ethical intent and adherence to shared norms (e.g., honesty, fairness).

The Moral Primacy Model (Goodwin et al., 2014) posits that Morality constitutes the most fundamental dimension of person perception. Moral traits—such as honesty, fairness, and compassion—carry disproportionate weight, because they signal a target's underlying intent toward others. According to this model, perceivers form moral impressions rapidly and with minimal information, and these impressions are both diagnostic and enduring. Even minor moral violations can lead to global devaluation, while moral virtue can redeem otherwise unfavourable impressions. Goodwin et al. (2014) demonstrated that Morality drives global evaluative judgements more strongly than competence or sociability, especially in ambiguous contexts. In several experiments, targets described in morally positive terms were consistently judged more favourably across multiple domains, whereas moral negativity prompted harsh reappraisal even when other traits remained constant.

The primacy of Morality arises from both functional and epistemic considerations. Functionally, moral traits help perceivers determine whether others pose a threat or can be trusted—an assessment with clear evolutionary stakes. Epistemically, moral judgements are seen as more stable and predictive of future behaviour than other traits. Consequently, when forming impressions, perceivers prioritise moral information and tend to rely on

disconfirmatory strategies, actively seeking evidence that might falsify moral virtue (Goodwin et al., 2014). This asymmetry amplifies the influence of negative moral information and explains the rigidity of moral reputations. In the context of the DPB, the Moral Primacy Model suggests that deceased targets will be most reliably elevated in the moral domain, as it provides the most potent and socially consequential lens through which their character is assessed.

A third class of theoretical propositions explains person perception through motivational processes. According to the Egocentric Tactician Model (Sedikides et al., 2021), individuals shape their social judgements to serve self-relevant goals. Specifically, impression formation is guided by two potent motives: self-enhancement, the desire to maintain or amplify a favourable self-image; and self-protection, the desire to avoid or neglect information that threatens self-regard or social standing. These motives influence how perceivers interpret ambiguous targets, especially when the evaluative stakes are high. For example, individuals may selectively interpret a deceased target's actions through a more charitable lens, not only to affirm shared values, but also to reinforce their own moral identity by appearing reverent and respectful. Praise for the dead, in this framework, reflects an implicit validation of the perceiver's own decency.

Self-presentation theory offers a complementary account. According to Baumeister and Hutton (1987), social evaluations are often shaped by the desire to influence an audience, especially under conditions where reputational consequences are salient. Self-presentational behaviour reflects both audience-pleasing motives, such as aligning with social expectations, and self-construction motives, such as projecting an identity consistent with internal ideals. In the context of death, these motives converge. Speaking well of the deceased may function as an audience-sensitive act that communicates moral character, civility, and adherence to cultural norms. The absence of dysology at funerals, for instance, may not simply reflect sincerity, but a self-presentational strategy shaped by the presence of a real or imagined audience. Such motives need not imply inauthenticity. Rather, they underscore the social embeddedness of person perception, especially when it pertains to targets whose memory is socially protected.

The three models that I discussed above jointly delineate the structure, salience, and function of social evaluation, clarifying the theoretical logic of the DPB. The Stereotype Content Model supplies a foundational dimensional structure—Sociability and Competence—against which trait inferences are anchored and evaluated. Its later refinements clarify the distinct contribution of Morality, foregrounding the need to differentiate ethical from affiliative content in evaluative judgement. The Moral Primacy Model advances this distinction by establishing

Morality as the central organising axis of person perception. Moral impressions emerge rapidly, exert disproportionate influence, and are resistant to revision, especially under ambiguity. This perspective positions Morality as the most likely domain through which the DPB will manifest, particularly when the deceased is unfamiliar or described in evaluatively ambiguous terms. Finally, motivational models, including the Egocentric Tactician Model and self-presentation theory, articulate the goals and pressures that shape these evaluations. They explain why posthumous praise may arise not solely from cognitive processes, but from self-validation and socially strategic motives, especially in contexts governed by normative expectations of reverence. In all, these models generate a coherent framework for testing the scope, selectivity, and psychological drivers of the DPB, and guide the development of the domain-based approach that I employed in this thesis.

Mechanisms: Categorisation, Attribution, Integration

Person perception operates through three core mechanisms: categorisation, attribution, and integration. These processes allow perceivers to reduce complexity, generate inferences, and construct coherent impressions of others. During these processes, perceivers observe, interpret, and integrate behavioural information to infer others' dispositions, intentions, and likely future actions (Fiske & Taylor, 2017; Moskowitz & Gill, 2013). Although often automatic, these mechanisms are shaped by prior knowledge, expectations, and context. Together, they support both rapid, intuitive evaluations and more deliberate, reflective judgements, each of which is vulnerable to bias under conditions of uncertainty.

Categorisation is the process by which perceivers assign others to social groups based on salient cues such as age, gender, ethnicity, or occupation. Once a target is categorised, perceivers typically draw on stored stereotypes or schemas to infer unobservable traits, intentions, or dispositions, often without conscious awareness (Fiske & Taylor, 2020). This reliance on category-based knowledge facilitates cognitive economy by reducing the need for individuated processing, particularly under conditions of limited attention or high task demands (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). However, this efficiency comes at the cost of accuracy. Once activated, group-based stereotypes shape downstream inferences, colouring how perceivers interpret even ambiguous behaviour (Quinn et al., 2007). Stereotypes shape impression formation both directly and indirectly. Directly, they supply trait-based inferences that fill gaps in behavioural information. Indirectly, they bias how ambiguous behaviour is construed, leading perceivers to interpret identical acts differently depending on the category assigned (Darley & Gross, 1983; Jacobs & Eccles, 1992). For example, the same academic's absence from a meeting may be explained as reclusiveness or prior commitment, depending on whether the

perceiver holds a stereotype of academics as socially withdrawn. Although cognitive load can suppress the initial activation of stereotypes, once activated, these mental shortcuts are more likely to be applied under resource-depleted conditions (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). Categorisation thus serves as a gateway to stereotype-based evaluation. Its speed and efficiency make it essential for everyday interaction but also underscore how quickly biases can become embedded in person perception, especially when perceivers seek cognitive shortcuts under time pressure or ambiguity.

Attribution concerns the inferences perceivers draw to explain others' behaviour. As originally proposed by Heider (1958), people act as intuitive psychologists, seeking to determine whether an observed action reflects internal dispositions or external circumstances. These causal explanations shape moral and reputational judgements by signalling the extent to which the behaviour was volitional, intentional, and controllable. Attribution acts as a bridge between behavioural interpretation and character evaluation: it determines whether an act is seen as accidental, understandable, or blameworthy. Weiner's (2006) attributional theory of moral emotion expands this logic, showing that effort is praised, ability is respected, and intentional wrongdoing is condemned. Attribution processes are not neutral, however. For example, perceivers overattribute actions to dispositional factors while underestimating situational constraints, a tendency known as the fundamental attribution error (Heider, 1958; Trope & Gaunt, 2007). This bias is especially pronounced under cognitive load or when stereotype-based schemas are accessible. Moreover, attributions differ in their motivational consequences: controllable failures elicit anger and blame, whereas uncontrollable failures evoke sympathy and help. These dynamics are central to moral evaluation and are particularly relevant in assessing the behaviour of deceased targets. For example, attributing a morally questionable act to situational duress may soften posthumous judgement, whereas attributing it to stable character may amplify condemnation. Attribution theory thus offers a functional and affectively rich account of how perceivers assign moral meaning to others' actions. These attributional tendencies shape the moral lens through which behaviour is evaluated. But once attributions are formed, whether about intent, control, or character, they must be integrated with other trait inferences to form a coherent overall impression.

Integration refers to the final step in the person perception process, whereby trait-specific inferences, shaped by categorisation and attribution, are synthesised into a coherent global evaluation. This integrative process enables perceivers to form stable impressions that facilitate social prediction and decision-making, but it also introduces systematic bias, especially when coherence is prioritised over accuracy. Perceivers favour impressions that are

internally consistent, socially functional, and cognitively parsimonious. Early information serves as an anchor, shaping how subsequent cues are interpreted and integrated (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1994). When new information contradicts the initial impression, perceivers often discount, reinterpret, or reweight it to maintain evaluative consistency (Anderson & Jacobsen, 1965; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). This anchoring effect can result in impression rigidity, where subsequent trait cues are absorbed selectively, reinforcing the initial evaluative trajectory even when disconfirming evidence is available. Such rigidity is not evenly distributed across trait types. Moral information, in particular, exerts asymmetric influence. As mentioned before, a single transgression can override a history of virtue, whereas isolated moral acts rarely redeem a tainted reputation (Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Trafimow & Trafimow, 1999).

Not all traits are integrated equally. Negative and extreme behaviours have a disproportionate influence on global impressions, phenomena known as the negativity bias and the extremity bias. These asymmetries reflect differences in trait diagnosticity across domains. In the moral domain, negative traits (e.g., dishonesty, cruelty) are seen as more revealing of character than positive ones, because perceivers implicitly assume that virtue requires consistent demonstration, whereas vice can be inferred from a single transgression (Reeder & Brewer, 1979). This asymmetry has been empirically supported by research showing that negative moral information is weighted more heavily than positive moral information in impression formation, often overriding other cues (Trafimow et al., 2005). In the Competence domain, the pattern reverses: positive behaviours (e.g., success, precision) are more diagnostic than failures, as they are harder to fake and signal stable, dispositional ability—an asymmetry that may explain why competence judgements are less responsive to status-based cues like death. Consequently, perceivers are more willing to update competence-based impressions following positive performance than to discount a target based on isolated mistakes. These diagnostic patterns explain why moral lapses can fatally tarnish reputations, whereas moral virtue requires sustained demonstration, and why a single display of competence may suffice to signal aptitude. These domain-specific diagnostic patterns clarify why posthumous moral elevation is particularly likely: under ambiguity, even minor cues to virtue may be overinterpreted, whereas the bar for moral condemnation remains high.

These biases reflect adaptive concerns: traits that signal moral danger or social utility are prioritised in impression formation. These effects are not well explained by additive models of information processing. Instead, they reflect the perceived diagnosticity of certain cues: traits that are rare, norm-deviant, or morally charged are seen as more informative about a

person's underlying character (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). A single act of dishonesty, for instance, may anchor the entire impression, resisting revision even in the presence of countervailing traits. This is because negative cues often signal categorical membership (e.g., "dishonest person") in ways that positive cues do not, and (as mentioned) because perceivers implicitly assume that moral virtue requires consistent demonstration, whereas vice requires only occasional violation (Reeder & Brewer, 1979).

These asymmetries are further explained by the category diagnosticity model (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). According to it, perceivers use trait cues to assign targets to dispositional categories, and certain behaviours are weighted more heavily because they are more diagnostic of those categories. In moral domains, negative traits (e.g., cruelty, dishonesty) are seen as more revealing than positive traits, leading to integration processes that amplify moral failings while discounting moral virtues. This pattern reverses in the domain of ability: successful performances are typically more diagnostic of competence than failures, prompting a positivity bias in evaluations of skill or intelligence (Reeder et al., 1982; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987).

Integration, then, is not merely the arithmetic sum of observed traits. It is a structured, goal-sensitive process shaped by trait valence, cue extremity, and perceived informativeness. Evaluative coherence is maintained not through neutrality, but through selectivity: perceivers strategically privilege cues deemed most diagnostic of moral character, social threat, or instrumental competence.

Together, these mechanisms form the inferential core of person perception. Categorisation provides a fast, efficient route for encoding others, but at the cost of introducing group-based bias. Attribution assigns causal meaning to behaviour, shaping moral judgement and emotional response through implicit rules about agency, responsibility, and control. Integration knits these inferences into global impressions, privileging cues that are seen as more diagnostic or socially consequential. Although each mechanism can operate independently, they are deeply interdependent: categorisation shapes which traits are inferred, attribution assigns meaning to those traits, and integration fuses them into a global impression that reflects both dispositional coherence and evaluative bias. Categorisation determines which traits are likely to be inferred; attribution influences how behaviours are morally coded; and integration ensures coherence in the resulting evaluation. Here, I apply this triadic framework to investigate whether knowledge of a person's death alters how they are perceived. Specifically, I ask whether deceased status shifts the content and weight of categorisations, the leniency or severity of attributions, and the selectivity of integrative judgement. These

processes are especially potent under evaluative ambiguity, where cognitive defaults and social motives exert disproportionate influence on judgement. In such cases, even minor shifts in how information is filtered, framed, or fused can result in systematic evaluative asymmetries, opening the door to the DPB.

Cognitive Accessibility and Halo Effects

Perceivers do not evaluate others in a vacuum. Instead, they rely on cognitive structures (i.e., schemas, trait concepts, evaluative norms) that are accessible in memory at the time of judgement. These structures act as interpretive filters, shaping how new social information is encoded, elaborated, and remembered. When descriptions are ambiguous, as is common in real-world person perception, the influence of accessible constructs is particularly pronounced. According to the law of cognitive structure activation (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991), perceivers resolve ambiguity by applying the most accessible evaluative construct. Accessibility can be chronic, arising from stable individual differences such as personality or ideology, or temporary, induced by contextual cues, social goals, or priming. In either case, the activated construct dominates interpretation when the stimulus permits multiple construals. This means that the same ambiguous behaviour: for example, a person interrupting others during conversation, may be interpreted as assertiveness or rudeness depending on which evaluative schema is currently accessible. This principle is particularly relevant in posthumous evaluation: if death cues culturally shared reverence norms or memorial scripts, these may render positive trait constructs more accessible, such as virtue, nobility, or forgiveness, thereby increasing the likelihood of a favourable interpretation, especially when the target is described in ambiguous terms. Cognitive accessibility, then, functions as both a filter and a magnifier, shaping how perceivers interpret information when the evaluative field is indeterminate.

Consider a vignette describing a person who engages in high-risk behaviours, such as skydiving, piloting jet-powered boats, or climbing mountains. These behaviours may plausibly be interpreted as “adventurous” or “reckless,” depending on which trait category is cognitively accessible at the time of judgement. Higgins et al. (1977; see also Mussweiler & Damisch, 2008) demonstrated that such trait accessibility can be primed through subtle and ostensibly unrelated prior exposure to evaluative terms. When participants were unobtrusively exposed to positive trait labels (e.g., *adventurous*) before reading an ambiguous vignette, they subsequently described and evaluated the target person in line with that primed category. Critically, this effect only occurred when the primed trait was applicable to the stimulus, underscoring a key property of activation-based biases: they operate not through indiscriminate influence, but through selective resonance (Martin, 1986). That is, the primed

construct must map meaningfully onto the target's behaviour for it to guide evaluation, reinforcing that accessibility interacts with interpretive relevance rather than overriding it.

In contexts involving death, social scripts often foreground themes of reverence, honour, and sanctity. These scripts may prime positively valenced trait categories (e.g., *inspiring*, *noble*, *selfless*), thereby altering how ambiguous information is construed. In the presence of such priming, behaviours that might otherwise be interpreted neutrally or even critically may instead be imbued with moral or admirable meaning. As such, trait accessibility acts as a psychological conduit through which normative reverence for the dead becomes embedded in the mechanics of impression formation.

Accessible traits influence not only how perceivers interpret ambiguous information but also how they attend to and remember social cues. As Higgins and Bargh (1987) demonstrated, trait constructs that are accessible, whether chronically or temporarily, bias perceptual and memory processes in favour of construct-consistent information. Perceivers are more likely to attend to behaviours that match the activated construct, encode them more efficiently, and retrieve them more readily in subsequent evaluations. This creates a reinforcing cycle in which accessible traits guide impression formation by amplifying congruent evidence while suppressing or distorting incongruent cues. In the context of posthumous evaluation, labelling a target as deceased may activate culturally entrenched scripts that foreground respect, nostalgia, or moral leniency. These scripts function as interpretive filters, selectively guiding perception and recall toward favourable attributes. This effect extends beyond initial encoding: accessible schemas shape how social information is stored, retrieved, and reinterpreted, biasing memory reconstruction in ways that preserve evaluative coherence (Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991). In the context of death, such mechanisms may stabilise global positivity even when the behavioural record is sparse or mixed. As a result, once a positive impression has formed—especially under ambiguity—it becomes cognitively entrenched, resistant to contradictory evidence, and more likely to shape retrospective memory. This mechanism explains how reputational elevation of the deceased can persist even in the absence of overt praise or norm enforcement: the activation of culturally shared constructs subtly scaffolds both the construction and stabilisation of global positivity.

The halo effect compounds the impact of accessibility by distorting evaluative consistency across traits. When perceivers form a positive impression of a target on one salient dimension, they generalise this positivity to other, unrelated attributes, even in the absence of diagnostic evidence. This bias, first empirically documented by Thorndike (1920), arises from the tendency to evaluate individuals holistically rather than as composites of independent

qualities. It reflects a coherence-seeking mechanism in person perception, wherein early positive impressions serve as anchors for interpreting subsequent traits, even when those traits are unrelated or weakly diagnostic (Anderson & Jacobsen, 1965; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). In his study of military officer ratings, Thorndike found high, uniform correlations among dimensions such as intelligence, leadership, physical appearance, and character—despite explicit instructions to rate each trait separately. These inflated correlations suggested a systematic "constant error" in judgement: once an evaluator regarded a person as generally positive or negative, this global impression coloured all subsequent trait assessments. This pattern was replicated across occupational contexts, including educational settings, where teacher ratings on unrelated qualities (e.g., voice and intellect) were strongly correlated due to an overarching impression of general merit. In the context of the DPB, the halo effect implies that reverence norms or accessible praise scripts may inflate global favourability. If death increases the accessibility of positive constructs, then an initial favourable impression (perhaps anchored in respect or perceived virtue) may spill over, elevating perceptions across domains, whether of Sociability, Morality, or Competence. The halo effect thus offers a mechanism by which isolated cues, particularly those associated with deceased status, can yield uniformly elevated evaluations, especially when trait information is sparse or selectively framed.

Together, cognitive accessibility and the halo effect illuminate how perceivers construct globally positive impressions from minimal or ambiguous input. Accessibility determines which trait constructs are activated in the face of interpretive ambiguity, while the halo effect ensures that early favourable inferences are generalised across domains. These dynamics motivate the use of richer, mixed biographies in this thesis, as ambiguity enables the full expression of accessibility-driven bias. When a target is described as deceased, reverence norms and cultural scripts may heighten the accessibility of prosocial traits, increasing the likelihood of a charitable initial judgement. This favourable impression can then cascade, elevating unrelated traits through integrative bias. These mechanisms offer a coherent account of how death status—without altering descriptive content—can trigger systematic shifts in person perception, producing the evaluative asymmetries observed in the DPB.

Variability and Motivation in Person Perception

Ambiguity, Impression Formation, and Self-Presentation Motives

Person perception varies not only by target characteristics but also by the psychological state of the perceiver. Even when encountering identical descriptive content, individuals may arrive at markedly different impressions. This divergence reflects the dynamic interplay of trait

ambiguity, cognitive accessibility, and motivational factors. Ambiguity serves as the catalyst: when a target description is evaluatively neutral or mixed (i.e., neither clearly positive nor negative), it invites multiple plausible interpretations. Such ambiguity is common in naturalistic judgement, where limited information constrains definitive conclusions. In these instances, perceivers resolve uncertainty by drawing on accessible internal structures, including their current goals, self-concept, and normative expectations. Ambiguous input activates the most readily available interpretive schema, which may be shaped by recent experience, dispositional tendencies, or situational primes (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991). This process enables efficient evaluation, but also introduces systematic variability in judgement. In the context of posthumous evaluation, such variability becomes especially pronounced, as reverence norms and social scripts may selectively bias which interpretive frames are accessed and applied.

Ambiguity invites motivated inference. When descriptive content permits more than one plausible interpretation, perceivers often resolve uncertainty in ways that serve their self-regulatory goals. Self-presentation theory (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987) posits that individuals tailor their evaluations to convey a socially desirable image, particularly in public or norm-sensitive contexts. Speaking positively of the dead may function as a reputational signal—communicating compassion, emotional maturity, or adherence to cultural norms of reverence. These impressions are not merely expressive; they are also defensive. The Egocentric Tactician Model (Sedikides et al., 2021) states that social evaluation is shaped by two overarching motives: self-enhancement—the pursuit of a morally virtuous self-image—and self-protection—the avoidance of reputational harm. Favourable posthumous appraisal thus enables perceivers to affirm their own decency and to avoid the social costs of violating unspoken taboos. These motives become especially salient under evaluative ambiguity, where there is interpretive latitude to privilege positive construals without risking inauthenticity. In this way, ambiguity serves as both the opportunity and the constraint: it permits motivated evaluation, but only within the bounds of plausible deniability.

Perceivers also vary in their cognitive strategy. The Continuum Model of Impression Formation (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990) proposes that social evaluation ranges along a continuum from category-based to individuated processing. At the categorical end, perceivers rely on social stereotypes and heuristics to make quick judgements based on minimal information. This mode is efficient but reductive, often invoked when cognitive resources are limited or the target is perceived as low in relevance or accountability. At the individuated end, perceivers exert greater effort to form nuanced impressions, integrating trait-specific and contextual data. Such processing requires both cognitive capacity and motivational engagement, typically

triggered when accuracy goals are high or when the target holds personal or instrumental significance.

In the case of ambiguous or unfamiliar targets, perceivers default to categorical processing unless prompted otherwise. This default is especially likely in normatively charged contexts, such as posthumous evaluation, where socially sanctioned interpretations (i.e., praise, reverence, restraint) are readily available and culturally reinforced. In such settings, category-based impressions may not only dominate, but may also appear more appropriate, reducing the likelihood of individuating scrutiny. Consequently, the deceased are often perceived through a normative lens of respect, with little motivation to examine or question specific behavioural details. This dynamic reinforces the DPB: by reducing the salience of individuating information and increasing reliance on socially desirable categories, perceivers construct broadly favourable impressions that serve both cognitive economy and reputational conformity.

In these ways, ambiguity does not merely permit bias; rather, it creates the conditions under which motivational and cognitive forces exert their strongest influence. Ambiguous descriptions allow perceivers to project internal goals, values, and norms onto the target, especially when clear behavioural cues are absent. This flexibility makes evaluative judgement highly context-dependent, shaped not only by stimulus content but also by the perceiver's regulatory objectives and social environment. The DPB is not a simple by-product of positively framed vignettes or weak trait cues; rather, it reflects the adaptive, goal-sensitive nature of person perception itself. When ambiguity is high, perceivers are free to resolve uncertainty in normatively sanctioned directions, drawing on shared cultural scripts that favour reverence for the dead. As such, the DPB emerges not from the content of the description alone, but from the cognitive architecture and motivational landscape in which that content is interpreted.

Law of Cognitive Structure Activation

The law of cognitive structure activation (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991) offers a formal account of how ambiguity in person perception is resolved. When perceivers encounter trait descriptions that are evaluatively indeterminate, they apply whichever evaluative construct is most accessible in memory. This accessibility may be chronic (i.e., stemming from personality traits, ideological commitments, or enduring identity constructs; Dweck et al., 1993) or situationally primed by contextual cues, recent experiences, or culturally salient norms (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991). Given that individuals interpret new information in reference to previously encoded knowledge, the most accessible cognitive structures (representing concepts, persons, traits, or roles) guide attention, inference, and memory. As Dornbusch et al.

(1965) observed, the same perceiver may describe different targets similarly, whereas different perceivers may describe the same target differently, underscoring the stable influence of internal accessibility.

This mechanism is not merely theoretical. Higgins et al. (1977) demonstrated that unobtrusive exposure to trait terms systematically biased impression formation. Participants were first primed with either positive (e.g., adventurous) or negative (e.g., reckless) trait labels. Subsequently, they read a vignette about a target named Donald who engaged in high-risk behaviours. The vignette read:

> "Donald spent a great amount of his time in search of what he liked to call excitement. He had already climbed Mt. McKinley, shot the Colorado rapids in a kayak, driven in a demolition derby, and piloted a jet-powered boat—without knowing very much about boats. He had risked injury, and even death, a number of times. Now he was in search of new excitement. He was thinking, perhaps, he would do some skydiving or maybe cross the Atlantic in a sailboat."

Despite the descriptive content being identical across conditions, participants primed with *adventurous* evaluated Donald significantly more positively than those primed with *reckless*. Importantly, these effects only emerged when the primed trait was applicable to the stimulus (Martin, 1986). These effects underscore how early activation of a trait schema can cascade across judgement domains, creating coherence where the stimulus is evaluatively ambiguous. As I later show, this initial impression may generalise further through mechanisms such as the halo effect, amplifying posthumous favourability across unrelated traits. Higgins et al. thereby established that ambiguous information is interpreted through the most accessible construct, shaping both immediate inferences and global evaluations.

In the context of the DPB, the law of cognitive structure activation (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991) explains how deceased status alters person perception without changing the descriptive stimulus. Death itself does not add evaluative content, but it may activate accessible constructs such as reverence, solemnity, or narrative closure. These culturally shared schemas, often triggered by funerary scripts or the emotional gravity of mortality, may become dominant in the interpretive hierarchy. If so, they provide a ready-made frame for construing ambiguous traits as virtuous, noble, or inspiring. This framing effect enables the same neutral description to appear admirable when the target is described as deceased, but unremarkable or morally indeterminate when described as alive.

This mechanism also explains both interindividual variability and systematic condition effects. When ambiguity is low (that is, when traits are explicitly valenced), accessibility exerts

little influence. But when ambiguity is high, as in the Higgins et al. (1977) design or the vignettes used in this thesis, perceivers have latitude to apply different interpretive frameworks. This flexibility opens the door to motivated or norm-congruent evaluation. In the case of the DPB, if death cues schemas of praise or moral leniency, these schemas may become differentially accessible and thus more likely to guide impression formation. Consequently, trait activation serves not merely as a priming effect, but as a mechanism through which cultural scripts are internalised and enacted during social evaluation.

These dynamics clarify why the DPB is not reducible to surface-level politeness or sentimentality. Instead, it reflects a deeper inferential mechanism in which knowledge of a person's death activates culturally privileged constructs, such as honour, redemption, or reverence, that selectively guide interpretation. Given that ambiguity creates space for this flexibility, and accessibility determines which evaluative lens fills that space, the law of cognitive structure activation provides a powerful explanatory account. It bridges individual and cultural psychology by showing how internalised social norms become cognitive defaults, which in turn shape impressions even in the absence of explicit intent. In this framework, the death of a target does not simply soften judgement: it alters the way the target is understood.

Biases in Person Perception

The Person Positivity Bias

Person perception is not a neutral process. Evaluations of others are systematically shaped by underlying cognitive, affective, and motivational biases that reflect how perceivers navigate social complexity. One of the most pervasive of these is the *person positivity bias* (Sears, 1983): the tendency to evaluate individual human targets more favourably than abstract entities, roles, or collectives. This bias reflects a structural asymmetry in social judgement. As targets become more personified (i.e., more vividly human, individuated, or relatable), they elicit richer, more affectively positive appraisals.

Sears (1983) documented this effect across eleven studies, using both experimental vignettes and large-scale survey data. In one study, for example, participants evaluated a person described as "kind" more positively than the abstract trait "kindness" itself. In another study, an individual politician was rated more favourably than politicians as a group, even when descriptions were held constant. Across Gallup polls from 1935 to 1974, 83% of named public figures received favourable evaluations, in contrast to the variability and negativity characterising institutional appraisals. Sears proposed that this asymmetry reflects an underlying personhood dimension, ranging from fully individuated human beings at one end to dehumanised or abstract entities at the other. Targets closer to the "person" pole of this

continuum receive a positivity bonus—an evaluative inflation rooted in their perceived humanity, uniqueness, and capacity for identification.

This theoretical model rests on three core premises. First, perceivers intuitively differentiate between individuals and categories, assigning richer cognitive and affective meaning to the former (Asch, 1940). Second, evaluative generosity increases with perceived similarity: perceivers are more inclined to favour targets they see as human-like, self-relevant, or emotionally engaging (Byrne, 1971). Third, attitudes are compartmentalised by unit of analysis; that is, perceivers often judge individual group members more favourably than their broader category, suggesting that person-level impressions operate under different cognitive rules than abstract or collective ones. Taken together, these findings indicate that person perception is guided not only by trait content but also by the ontological status of the target itself.

The person positivity bias has direct relevance to my thesis. If the mere act of naming or individuating a target increases favourability, then posthumous evaluations, often highly personalised, may amplify this effect. The dead are frequently represented through biographical narrative, eulogistic framing, or emotionally evocative imagery, each of which increases personification. Moreover, as discussed earlier in this chapter, death may function as a personifying cue in its own right. Awareness of another's mortality invites reflection on shared human vulnerability and existential finality. Such cues may increase psychological closeness or self-other overlap, thereby drawing the target closer to the "person" end of the evaluative continuum and enhancing positivity. In this sense, the person positivity bias may operate as an enabling condition for the DPB, amplifying evaluative warmth through heightened individuation.

However, the two biases are not interchangeable. The person positivity bias concerns comparisons between persons and non-persons, or between the individuated and the abstract. The DPB, by contrast, concerns within-person status asymmetries: it examines whether the same individual is evaluated differently when described as dead rather than alive. This is a subtler and more context-sensitive effect, one that cannot be fully explained by personification alone. As demonstrated throughout this introduction, several additional mechanisms (such as trait ambiguity, cognitive accessibility, halo-based spillover, and normative pressure) must be integrated to account for the DPB. For example, ambiguous descriptions allow room for interpretive flexibility; if reverence norms are accessible, they may bias interpretation toward moral virtue or prosocial intent. Likewise, halo effects may cascade an initial favourable impression across all trait domains, producing uniformly elevated evaluations even in the absence of diagnostic evidence.

Thus, although the person positivity bias may increase baseline favourability toward deceased targets, it does not explain why death itself alters judgement in a systematic way. The DPB is better conceptualised as an interaction between status-based cues (i.e., deceased vs. alive) and the evaluative mechanisms reviewed above. Personhood may set the stage, but it is cognitive accessibility, social motivation, and norm sensitivity that determine whether the evaluative script shifts once a target is known to be dead. Whereas several biases shape person perception, few have explicitly examined the role of mortality status. I now turn to the literature on the DPB, reviewing its core findings, key paradigms, and the methodological patterns that have influenced its empirical foundation.

The Death Positivity Bias

Core findings and Key Paradigms

The inclination to evaluate the dead more favourably than the living has long been observed in cultural and clinical contexts, but empirical investigation only began in earnest in the late 20th century. One of the earliest studies was conducted by Futterman et al. (1990), who examined how bereaved spouses retrospectively evaluated their marriages compared to nonbereaved individuals. Using a longitudinal design, the authors followed 212 widowed older adults and 162 nonbereaved peers, measuring marital adjustment and depression at 2, 12, and 30 months post-loss. At every time point, bereaved participants rated their marriages more favourably than nonbereaved controls, despite comparable demographic and relationship durations. This pattern held across multiple indices, including global happiness, frequency of disagreements, shared leisure, and emotional intimacy. These findings provided early evidence for posthumous idealisation, consistent with theories of sanctification (Lopata, 1979) and idealisation (Parkes & Weiss, 1983).

Crucially, Futterman et al. (1990) also examined the role of depression in these retrospective evaluations. Among nonbereaved participants, depression correlated with more negative appraisals of one's marriage. In contrast, among the bereaved, higher depression scores were associated with *more* favourable appraisals of the lost relationship. This reversal challenges the cognitive model of depression, which predicts global negative bias, and instead supports a behavioural model in which depression reflects the loss of a positively reinforcing relationship. The authors argued that idealised recollection may serve as a psychological buffer, preserving a sense of meaning and continuity in the wake of loss. The findings were especially striking because they emerged across a 30-month window and did not significantly vary by gender, indicating that positively biased recall is a stable feature of bereavement.

Although Futterman et al. (1990) did not test trait evaluations of the deceased directly, they provided a foundational precedent for the DPB. They demonstrated that death alters evaluative frames even when the target (the deceased spouse) is not explicitly described, and that this effect interacts with emotional and motivational states in theoretically rich ways. The pattern (i.e., more favourable appraisals of the dead than the living, particularly under conditions of psychological vulnerability) foreshadowed key features of the DPB, as later defined by Allison and Eylon (2005). Subsequent experiments would refine the paradigm by holding descriptive content constant and manipulating mortality status directly.

Allison and Eylon (2005) were the first to examine whether a target being dead or alive influences participants' appraisals of them. These authors instructed participants to read a vignette about a fictional person called Erik Sullivan, who had established a company in 1937 and made it highly profitable. The vignette discussed Sullivan's life, chronicling his role in the company up until his retirement. At the end of the vignette, half of the participants read that Sullivan died in 1985 (dead condition), and the other half read that Sullivan was alive (living condition). Following the vignette, participants responded to several items measuring their respect for Sullivan, how favourably they regarded him (as a company leader and businessman), how proud they would be as his employees, how proud they believed his employees were to work for him, how much they believed he sacrificed for his company, how inspiring they found him, and how inspired they believed his employees were. Participants formed more favourable impressions of Sullivan in the dead condition than in the living condition. They judged the dead Sullivan to be a better leader, a better businessman, having sacrificed more, more inspiring, as well as inspiring more pride and motivation among his employees. Allison and Eylon labelled the phenomena of assigning more positive traits to a dead person than an equivalent living one as the DPB.

In follow-up research, Allison and Eylon (2005) created vignettes describing Sullivan as either a good company leader who had made smart hires and visionary investments (competent condition) or a poor company leader who had made bad hires and short-sighted investments (incompetent condition). At the end of the vignette, Sullivan was depicted as either dead or alive. In Study 1, participants viewed Sullivan more favourably when he was portrayed as dead (than alive), replicating the DPB. In Study 2, Allison and Eylon changed the Study 1 vignettes by adding an evaluatively mixed (containing good and bad aspects) description of the financial health of Sullivan's company; here, the dependent variable of interest was appraisals of Sullivan's company. The DPB extended beyond participants' evaluations of Sullivan to perceptions of his company. Regardless of whether Sullivan was presented as competent or

incompetent, participants judged Sullivan's company as more successful and financially healthy when he was dead than alive. Furthermore, participants in the dead condition believed that Sullivan's company had a more promising future. This extension demonstrated that the DPB was not confined to trait-based judgements of the individual but generalised to broader assessments of institutional legacy.

Allison et al. (2009) extended their work on the DPB through five experiments. In Study 1, participants read the same vignette about Erik Sullivan used in earlier research and rated the extent to which they liked him, perceived him as competent, and found him inspiring. Participants in the dead condition rated Sullivan significantly higher on all three dimensions. Study 2 replicated this pattern using a within-subjects design and a new vignette about a female target, Sharon Wilkerson. Participants first evaluated Wilkerson based on a vignette and then, following a short filler task, re-evaluated her under the guise that a year had passed. Those told she had died in the interim rated her significantly more positively than they had before, whereas those told she was still living did not change their evaluations. Study 3 analysed media coverage of eight celebrities, including Florence Griffith Joyner, John F. Kennedy Jr., and Richard Nixon. Coders unaware of hypothesis rated each article as positive or negative in tone. Significantly more positive articles were published posthumously (308 of 407) than during the individuals' lifetimes (168 of 290), consistent with the DPB. Thus, across experimental and real-world contexts, participants consistently formed more favourable impressions of deceased targets than equivalent living ones. Allison et al. interpreted these findings as evidence that obituarising the dead positively: whether in personal evaluations or public discourse, is a recurring manifestation of the DPB.

In Study 4, Allison et al. (2009) examined whether the DPB varied across evaluative domains. Participants read vignettes about a target described as either highly moral, highly immoral, highly competent, or highly incompetent. The target was presented as either dead or alive, yielding a 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) × 2 (domain: morality vs. competence) × 2 (status: dead vs. alive) design. Participants then rated the target on a range of traits. Results revealed that the DPB emerged in both domains, but with different profiles. For competence, participants rated the dead target as significantly more competent than the living target, regardless of whether the original description was positive or negative. For morality, the dead target was judged more positively than the living target when described in positive terms, but not when described negatively, suggesting that the DPB in the moral domain may be contingent on the absence of clear immorality. These findings imply that the DPB generalises across trait

domains but may be more selective in the moral domain, consistent with the idea that morality exerts stronger constraint on evaluative extremity.

In Study 5, Allison et al. (2009) explored whether the DPB applies to individuals whose moral character changed over time. Participants read a vignette about David Uhles, a businessman who underwent a transformation in either competence or morality. In the competence conditions, Uhles either improved or declined in business ability over his career; in the moral conditions, he either reformed from immoral to moral, or deteriorated from moral to immoral. Participants were randomly assigned to read that Uhles was either alive or had died. Results showed that participants judged Uhles more favourably on competence and inspiration when he was described as deceased, replicating the DPB. In the moral transformation conditions, however, death status moderated evaluative focus: participants weighted end-of-life moral behaviour more heavily when Uhles was dead, judging reformed (immoral-to-moral) deceased targets more favourably and fallen (moral-to-immoral) deceased targets more negatively than their living counterparts. This pattern, termed the St. Augustine effect, suggests that death cues retrospective closure and may heighten the salience of redemptive arcs in moral judgement. Although this effect reflects a form of death-based polarisation, the overall elevation of formerly immoral individuals in the deceased condition aligns with the DPB, particularly when late-stage behaviour supports moral reappraisal.

In Study 6, Allison et al. (2009) tested whether obituaries exhibit more positive evaluative tone than other biographical accounts. They analysed the language used in obituaries versus profile articles for a sample of 40 well-known individuals from various domains (e.g., politics, sports, entertainment). Half the texts were obituaries written posthumously; the other half were biographical profiles written while the targets were still alive. All texts were drawn from *The New York Times* and were matched for length and subject matter. Trained raters coded each article for evaluative tone across multiple dimensions, including general positivity, moral traits, and inspirational qualities. Obituaries were significantly more positive than profile articles across all dimensions, particularly for moral and inspirational content. This linguistic shift is consistent with the DPB: evaluators treat the same person more favourably once they are deceased, even in journalistic contexts where impartiality is expected. Importantly, the effect was not limited to individual raters' preferences but emerged in institutional discourse, underscoring the cultural embeddedness of posthumous idealisation.

Taken together, the six studies in Allison et al. (2009) offer compelling and multi-method evidence for the DPB. The bias generalises across targets (Erik Sullivan, Sharon Wilkerson, David Uhles), across evaluative domains (liking, competence, inspiration, morality), and across

both experimental and archival contexts (obituary analysis). In studies where trait dimensions were explicitly measured, the DPB appeared most robust for Sociability- and Morality-related evaluations, such as liking and inspiration, though competence was also elevated in several conditions. Notably, the DPB extended to cases where a target's character had changed over time, with death increasing the salience of redemptive closure. Obituary-based findings reinforce the conclusion that the DPB is not merely a laboratory artefact, but a socially pervasive pattern with implications for institutional remembrance. Overall, Allison et al. (2009) provide the strongest empirical foundation to date for the claim that deceased individuals are evaluated more favourably than living ones, even when objective biographical information is held constant.

Hayes (2016) investigated whether praising the dead is a pervasive and functional tendency in person perception. Drawing on terror management theory, the author proposed that people may idealise the deceased both as a cultural norm and as a means of mitigating the existential anxiety triggered by mortality salience. Across three experiments, Hayes tested whether people describe deceased others more positively, whether this pattern generalises to disliked targets, and whether praise serves a defensive function by reducing death-related distress.

In Study 1, participants were asked to recall a close (vs. distant) other and to imagine that this person had recently died (vs. not). They then provided open-ended descriptions of the target and completed standard trait evaluations. Coders quantified the number of positive, negative, and neutral descriptors. Participants in the 'death' condition produced more positive and fewer negative descriptions than those in the 'no death' condition, regardless of whether the target was close or distant. This initial finding established that even minimal mortality cues shift descriptive focus toward the favourable.

Study 2 extended this design by substituting "closeness" with "liking," yielding a 2 (target: liked vs. disliked) × 2 (frame: dead vs. alive) between-subjects design. Participants again described the target and evaluated them using trait scales. The results replicated the Study 1 finding: participants used more positive descriptors and fewer negative ones in the death condition. Notably, even disliked targets were evaluated more favourably when imagined dead, although the reduction in negative descriptors for disliked others was less pronounced. On the rating task, participants in the death condition rated their target higher overall, an effect driven exclusively by increased scores on positive traits. There was no effect on negative trait ratings. These results suggest the DPB generalises beyond socially desirable targets, but that the degree of moderation depends partly on initial valence.

Study 3 tested whether praising the dead serves a psychological function by reducing death-thought accessibility, a terror management theory indicator of death-related distress. Participants recalled either a close or disliked target, all of whom were described as having recently died. Half of the participants were asked to write a eulogy-style description of the target, while the other half simply listed their thoughts. All participants then completed a word-fragment completion task designed to measure death-thought accessibility (e.g., COFF_ _ could become *coffee* or *coffin*). Among those recalling a close target, participants who described the deceased in positive terms exhibited significantly lower death-thought accessibility than those who merely listed thoughts. No such effect was observed for disliked targets. This pattern suggests that praising the dead may buffer distress, but only when the death concerns someone personally meaningful.

Taken together, Hayes (2016) provided robust empirical support for the DPB. Participants consistently produced more positive evaluations of a target when asked to imagine them as deceased, and this effect extended across interpersonal closeness and liking. Crucially, however, the tendency to praise the dead only reduced existential distress for close targets. Hayes interpreted this asymmetry through the lens of terror management theory, proposing that cultural scripts of reverence for the dead may help restore meaning and manage death-related anxiety. Yet, although these findings demonstrate the motivational breadth and partial functionality of the DPB, they do not fully explain its underlying cognitive mechanisms. As Hayes noted, praising the dead may often reflect a socially normative default rather than a conscious strategy.

Although Hayes (2016) demonstrated that the DPB generalises across levels of liking and familiarity, the mechanisms driving these evaluative shifts remain underspecified. Hayes proposed that posthumous positivity may serve a defensive, anxiety-buffering function. However, this explanation was only partially supported: in Study 2, deceased targets were evaluated more positively regardless of participants' liking for them, yet death-related anxiety was not reliably attenuated in the disliked condition. This suggests that the DPB cannot be fully explained by the motivation to protect the memory of liked others, or to manage existential discomfort. Instead, the bias may reflect more general features of impression formation. My thesis builds directly on this limitation by employing controlled experimental manipulations of target status, with unfamiliar targets described in pretested trait terms. This allows for a more precise test of whether the DPB is driven by culturally scripted reverence (as Hayes suggests), or by broader mechanisms such as schema accessibility, motivated reasoning, or audience-sensitive evaluation. By systematically measuring responses across interpersonal domains and

manipulating contextual factors such as norm salience and communication goals, I clarify not only when but why the DPB arises.

Drzewiecka and Cwalina (2020) provided the most recent empirical test of the DPB, combining archival survey data and experimental methods to assess whether the bias generalises to real and fictitious political leaders. In Study 1, the authors analysed monthly approval ratings of Polish President Lech Kaczyński, collected by the national polling agency CBOS between 2006 and 2010, as well as one follow-up poll from 2012. During his presidency, public evaluations were consistently negative: by mid-2008, 65% of respondents evaluated Kaczyński poorly, and only 35% positively. This trend reversed immediately following his sudden death in a 2010 plane crash. In May 2010, one month after the crash, 65% of respondents judged Kaczyński positively, and only 23% negatively. The effect persisted over time: in 2012, 57% continued to evaluate him positively, with only 28% negative. These shifts extended across domains. Perceptions of Kaczyński's competence (e.g., as a 'statesman') and morality (e.g., as 'sincere') significantly increased following his death. However, the authors did not test whether this shift reflected a causal effect of death or confounded influences such as media framing or national mourning. In addition, their reliance on single-item measures from pre-existing surveys leaves the findings vulnerable to concerns about statistical inference and construct validity.

In Study 2, Drzewiecka and Cwalina used an experimental design to address these limitations. They manipulated the gender (male vs. female), leadership style (positive vs. negative climate), and mortality status (dead vs. alive) of a fictitious Polish politician, and asked participants to evaluate the target on validated measures of Agency (Competence) and communion (morality; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke & Szlendak, 2010). Results supported a domain-specific DPB. Participants evaluated deceased leaders as more competent than living ones, regardless of gender or leadership style. The morality effect was more selective: only female leaders received more favourable communion ratings in the dead condition. Global evaluations also showed a modest main effect of mortality status.

These findings suggest that the DPB generalises beyond real-world public figures to fictional ones. However, the targets were still described as politicians, a role that carries inherent evaluative salience. As such, the bias may remain moderated by gendered expectations or leadership stereotypes, particularly in the morality domain, where women are stereotypically expected to embody warmth and virtue. In this thesis, I extend the DPB paradigm to lay, unfamiliar targets who lack occupational or status-based cues, allowing for a more rigorous test of whether the bias emerges under evaluative ambiguity rather than role-

driven expectations. Drzewiecka and Cwalina's findings support the notion that posthumous evaluations reflect both cognitive (e.g., coherence-seeking) and normative (e.g., reverence) processes, though they stop short of formally testing competing explanations. I build on these results by examining whether contextual factors, such as norm salience and audience goals, moderate the strength and selectivity of the DPB across domains.

Taken together, these studies offer converging evidence for the DPB across a variety of targets, domains, and dependent measures. However, they also share a set of methodological choices that constrain the generalisability of their findings. Most employ vignette paradigms, in which status is manipulated through brief written descriptions, and rely on evaluations of public figures: either real (e.g., political leaders, celebrities) or fictionalised proxies with salient occupational roles. Although such designs allow for experimental control, they also introduce confounds related to familiarity, status, and existing evaluative scripts. Public figures are often subject to pre-existing attitudes, and occupational roles such as "CEO" or "politician" carry trait expectations that may amplify or attenuate evaluative shifts. Even fictionalised targets, such as Erik Sullivan in Allison and Eylon's studies (2005, 2009), were described as highly successful business leaders whose competence and inspiration were already implied by their roles. To advance understanding of the DPB, it is therefore necessary to scrutinise these methodological patterns and test whether the bias generalises to targets who are neither familiar nor imbued with status or moral prestige.

Methodological Patterns

Research on the DPB has overwhelmingly relied on vignette-based paradigms featuring public figures or role-defined targets. In most cases, participants evaluate a fictional or real person described in a short narrative, with mortality status manipulated by indicating whether the target is dead or alive. This method enables tight experimental control and consistent trait framing across conditions, reducing confounds linked to biographical variability. However, it also limits ecological validity. The brevity and abstraction of vignettes may underrepresent the richness of person perception in real social contexts, where trait inference unfolds dynamically. Moreover, by focusing on targets such as CEOs, politicians, or celebrities, existing studies risk conflating the effects of mortality status with status-based or culturally embedded schemas. These role-defined figures often carry evaluative weight independent of the mortality manipulation, as they are associated with pre-existing trait expectations (e.g., competence for CEOs, morality or charisma for politicians) and may activate schema-congruent attributions regardless of evaluative ambiguity. The prevalence of public figures also makes it difficult to assess whether the DPB applies to lay targets for whom no such schemas exist. This restricts

theoretical scope: if death only amplifies favourable appraisals of those already embedded in evaluative scripts, the bias may reflect reputation polishing rather than a general shift in person perception.

In addition to role salience, the vignettes used in DPB research have typically portrayed targets in morally or professionally positive terms. Sullivan, Wilkerson, and Uhles (Allison & Eylon, 2005; Allison et al., 2009) are depicted as accomplished business leaders; Konieczna and Konieczny (Drzewiecka & Cwalina, 2020) as charismatic or effective politicians; and even the autobiographical targets in Hayes (2016) were selected by participants based on existing familiarity and subjective valence. As a result, many studies may have inadvertently constrained the interpretive space available to participants, making it difficult to isolate whether the observed positivity arises from death itself or from positively valenced cues that are simply amplified by posthumous framing. When targets are unambiguously moral, competent, or likeable, evaluators may engage in straightforward affirmation rather than engage with death-related scripts or accessibility-driven reinterpretation. This methodological pattern may help explain why some studies report robust global positivity (e.g., Allison et al., 2009), whereas others find domain-specific or conditional effects (e.g., Drzewiecka & Cwalina, 2020). By contrast, in this thesis, I use evaluatively ambiguous descriptions of lay targets to test whether death status independently alters person perception in the absence of strong trait cues or role affordances. This allows for a clearer test of whether the DPB reflects a structural shift in social evaluation or an artefact of evaluative anchoring.

Potential Boundary Conditions of the Death Positivity Bias

The DPB's boundary conditions remain largely unexplored. Allison and Eylon (2005) found that death polarised evaluations of a target's morality rather than biasing it positively, as the DPB suggests would occur. That is, dead (than living) targets described in a vignette as moral were judged as more moral; conversely, dead (than living) immoral targets were rated as more immoral (displaying a death negativity bias). Allison et al. (2009, Study 4) used vignettes that described Sullivan as very moral or very immoral, and as dead or alive. When participants thought Sullivan was dead (than alive), their morality judgements of him polarised. Allison et al. (2009, Study 5) used vignettes that described Uhles as either a moral person who became immoral, or an immoral person who became moral. Participants who read that Uhles was moral but became immoral evaluated him more negatively when they were told that he was dead than alive. Participants who read that Uhles was immoral but became moral evaluated him more positively when they were told that he was dead than alive. As well as showing a St. Augustine effect, these findings indicate that morality judgements, based on Uhles' final stage

as moral or immoral, polarised in death. Drzewiecka and Cwalina (2020) reported a DPB for appraisals of agency (Competence) towards all targets. However, a DPB for communion (morality) only occurred towards a female target. This may explain the boundary condition of morality found in Allison et al.'s (2005, 2009) research, which used male or anonymous targets (described simply as a leader) when testing the DPB.

The end-of-life bias describes the tendency to heavily weigh end-of-life behaviours when evaluating the moral character of a target (Newman et al., 2010). The end-of-life bias is so strong that end-of-life behaviour outweighs contradictory behaviour preceding it, even if the contradictory behaviour occurred for an overwhelmingly longer duration. Newman et al. (Study 3) reported that the end-of-life bias uniquely applies to behaviour seen as intentional and intrinsically motivated, ruling out alternative explanations of recency effects that would lead to end-of-life behaviour outweighing earlier behaviours regardless of intention (Murdock, 1962). Newman et al. theorised that the end-of-life bias results from the inference that a target's true self was finally revealed. This inference is stronger for behavioural changes preceding death, as those changes display a person's last behaviour whereas a living target may revert to their old ways. The dimension of morality may represent a boundary condition for the DPB, given that the end-of-life bias supersedes the DPB when it comes to appraisals of deceased targets morality. That is, instead of making favourably appraisals of the dead target's morality, appraisals will be weighted by end-of-life behaviour—be it moral or immoral.

In Drzewiecka and Cwalina (2020), participants evaluated the agency (competence) and communion (morality) of a politician. Like Allison and Eylon (2005) and Allison et al. (2009), Drzewiecka and Cwalina used vignettes describing a fictional target as either moral or immoral followed by information that the target had died or was alive. Next, participants filled out a questionnaire evaluating the target. However, there was a methodological difference between Drzewiecka and Cwalina on the one hand and Allison et al. (2005, 2009, Study 4) on the other. Drzewiecka and Cwalina used both a male and female target in different conditions, whereas Allison et al. used a male target. In the male condition, Drzewiecka and Cwalina did not observe a DPB on morality, which may reconcile their findings with those of Allison and Eylon (2005) and Allison et al. (2009), but they did not observe a death polarisation bias among male targets. Put differently, employing a similar methodology, they failed to replicate findings that the dimension of morality represents a boundary condition for the DPB for male targets. Additionally, Drzewiecka and Cwalina reported that dead female politicians were evaluated as more moral than alive female politicians regardless of whether they were described as moral or

immoral, further suggesting that morality is not necessarily a boundary condition of the DPB, as appraisals do not polarise.

Researchers have also looked for the presence of the DPB in inanimate objects. Allison and Eylon (2005) reported that the DPB extended beyond evaluations of the person described in their vignette (Sullivan) to perceptions of his company. Depending on whether participants perceived a company as an abstract entity or a less abstract collection of people, Allison et al.'s findings suggest that the DPB applies to inanimate objects or a collection of people similarly to individuals. In a study assessing evaluations of a painting of a barge on the Seine, Tsutsumida and Shiraiwa (2020) presented participants with one of three profiles. In all profiles, the painter was ostensibly award-winning. In the dead condition, the painter had died three years prior. In the stop-painting condition, the painter was still alive but had stopped painting three years ago (to check that effects were due to death and not just scarcity). In the living condition, the painter had not died or stopped painting. Participants were then shown the painting, attributed to the artist in the profile they read. In actuality, participants in all conditions viewed the same painting. Tsutsumida and Shiraiwa did not find main effects of condition (living vs. living but stopped painting vs. dead) on evaluations of the painting. This null effect suggests that the DPB may only apply to evaluations of animate beings (people) and not inanimate objects. Alternatively, the null effect may be attributable to scarcity not being adequately manipulated, the artist being dead for three years being insufficient to evince the DPB, or the small sample size.

Tsutsumida and Shiraiwa's (2020) findings imply that participants in Allison et al.'s (2005) study did not interpret Sullivan's company as an abstract inanimate entity (akin to a painting of a barge), but as a collection of animate beings (people). This implication reconciles the findings of the two studies, and is consistent with the proposed link between the DPB and person positivity bias. A company being perceived as a collection of individuals would place it closer to the individual pole on the scale representing the person positivity bias, manifesting positive appraisals. As such, it is possible that, if the painting being evaluated in Tsutsumida and Shiraiwa's experiment had been a portrait of a person, it would have been perceptually proximal enough to a real person to showcase the DPB. Tsutsumida and Shiraiwa's null effect suggests the DPB may be dependent on targets being proximal to personhood.

One potential boundary condition that remains entirely untested is group membership. No existing study has examined whether the DPB applies equally to ingroup and outgroup targets, or whether it is moderated by social identity cues such as nationality or affiliation. Given that many reverence norms are culturally bounded, it remains unclear whether

adversarial or outgroup figures receive the same posthumous leniency. I examined this issue in Experiment 3.

Theoretical Integration: Interpersonal Domains and the DPB

Reframing Previous Dependent Variables into a Dimensional Structure

Although the DPB has been demonstrated across a wide range of dependent variables, prior research has not systematically organised these traits into a coherent theoretical structure. Studies have variously measured liking, respect, inspiration, competence, and morality—each capturing a different aspect of person perception, but lacking an organising framework through which to interpret patterns of elevation or absence. This heterogeneity has made it difficult to determine whether the DPB reflects a general halo, a domain-specific evaluative shift, or a set of overlapping biases expressed through loosely defined trait appraisals.

To address this issue, I recoded the dependent variables used in prior studies into a tripartite structure drawn from the person perception literature: Sociability, Morality, and Competence. This structure builds on foundational models such as the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002), which distinguishes warmth and competence as primary axes of social judgement, and on more recent refinements that separate Sociability (e.g., friendliness, likeability) from Morality (e.g., honesty, virtue) as distinct yet functionally interdependent domains (Brambilla et al., 2011; Goodwin, 2015). Under this framework, liking and warmth are treated as markers of Sociability; Morality and respect as indices of Morality; and Competence (with scale items measuring intelligence) as the indicator of Competence. This recoding enables clearer theoretical interpretation of which dimensions are reliably elevated in posthumous appraisal, and whether the DPB expresses itself as a generalised positivity effect or a selective shift concentrated within particular domains.

Justification for Trait Selection

The present thesis adopts a structured approach to trait selection, grounded in the tripartite framework of interpersonal domains: Sociability, Morality, and Competence. This framework is both theoretically justified and empirically supported. Morality and Sociability reflect distinct yet overlapping facets of warmth-related perception (Cuddy et al., 2008), whereas competence forms a separate evaluative axis related to instrumental efficacy (Fiske et al., 2002). I selected traits that cleanly map onto these domains and that have precedent in prior DPB research, enabling both theoretical clarity and empirical comparability.

Sociability is indexed through warmth and liking. While warmth often conflates Morality and interpersonal accessibility, I follow recent research in treating it as a sociability-related

construct concerned with friendliness, emotional receptivity, and approachability (Leach et al., 2007; Goodwin et al., 2014). Liking, though broader in evaluative scope, is included as a global sociability judgement. These traits are especially relevant when targets are ambiguous or unfamiliar, as they often serve as intuitive proxies for social desirability or affiliative ease.

Morality is operationalised through two measures: morality and respect. These traits capture the target's perceived ethical character and normative standing. Prior research suggests that Morality is not only the most heavily weighted domain in impression formation (Brambilla et al., 2011; Goodwin, 2015), but also the most resistant to revision and the most diagnostic under ambiguity (Reeder & Brewer, 1979). Respect is included alongside explicit morality ratings because it captures socially mediated moral regard: how the target is judged in light of communal norms and evaluative scripts (Fiske et al., 2007).

Competence is assessed directly through ratings of competence or closely related traits such as intelligence and agency, depending on the study. This domain is essential for testing the selectivity of the DPB. Whereas warmth and morality may reflect reverence-driven or norm-based inflation, competence is less affectively loaded and more sensitive to perceived ability. If posthumous elevation is selective rather than global, it should manifest most reliably in the Morality domain, intermittently in Sociability, and least consistently in Competence. By standardising trait selection across studies and categorising each dependent variable within this tripartite framework, I enable a more precise assessment of the DPB's domain specificity. This approach allows me to test not only whether deceased targets are evaluated more positively, but how and where those evaluative asymmetries are most likely to emerge.

Warmth was not included as a dependent variable in the early studies of this thesis. At the time of design, I had not yet reappraised my research programme through the interpersonal domain framework, nor fully distinguished between Sociability-related and Morality-related traits. My initial trait selection was based on precedents in the DPB literature and intuitive coverage of global evaluative tendencies. The later inclusion of warmth reflects both theoretical maturation and a more rigorous mapping of traits onto distinct evaluative domains. By incorporating warmth alongside liking in subsequent studies, I am able to assess the DPB's effects on sociability more precisely and to examine whether interpersonal responsiveness—as distinct from ethical character—contributes to posthumous elevation. Because *respect* is semantically close to the colloquial admonition to 'respect the dead,' I treat it as a deference-oriented indicator and revisit possible wording sensitivity in the General Discussion.

Limitations in Prior Research

Despite converging evidence for the DPB, the existing literature suffers from several key limitations that restrict both the generalisability of findings and the theoretical clarity of the phenomenon. Most notably, prior studies have overwhelmingly relied on high-status targets—such as CEOs, company founders, political leaders, or celebrities—whose social roles carry evaluative salience even in the absence of detailed behavioural information (Allison et al., 2005, 2009; Drzewiecka & Cwalina, 2020). These targets are often evaluated through existing cultural scripts that conflate fame, leadership, and competence with moral worth. Participants may be inclined to appraise such figures positively regardless of mortality status, especially when normative scripts (e.g., reverence for the dead) intersect with status-based respect. This methodological concentration introduces multiple interpretive confounds. First, leaders and celebrities often elicit favourable impressions by default, even when targets are unfamiliar. Indeed, parasocial relationships with public figures can foster exaggerated positive appraisals rooted in perceived intimacy, identification, or idealisation (Derrick et al., 2008; McCutcheon et al., 2002). This raises the possibility that the observed DPB effects reflect target familiarity, perceived status, or cultural reverence rather than mortality-driven shifts in evaluation. Moreover, in studies involving deceased celebrities (Allison et al., 2009), evaluative elevation may be shaped by media portrayals or collective mourning processes that cannot be easily replicated or controlled.

Hayes (2016) attempted to address this limitation by asking participants to evaluate personally known targets rather than public figures. However, this approach introduces a different confound: participants had pre-existing impressions of the described individuals, which likely influenced the positivity of their descriptions regardless of experimental framing (Rule & Ambady, 2010; Todorov et al., 2005). Because perceivers generally form robust impressions after brief exposure, evaluations of known others are rarely neutral or malleable. Hayes' method thereby reintroduced ambiguity in a different form: rather than the stimulus being evaluatively neutral, participants' memory representations were themselves deeply encoded and affectively charged. In contrast, the present thesis uses strictly controlled vignette-based targets, described in neutral or evaluatively ambiguous terms, to isolate the effects of mortality status from trait familiarity or personal sentiment.

A second limitation concerns statistical power. Sample sizes in most DPB studies have been modest. In Allison et al. (2009) and Hayes (2016), sample sizes ranged from $N = 52$ to $N = 130$ ($M = 92.71$, $SD = 26.34$; Table 1), raising concerns about the reliability and reproducibility of the reported effects. Only Drzewiecka and Cwalina (2020) employed a larger sample ($N = 465$),

but their study was confined to evaluations of a politician, again constraining generalisability. The limited statistical power in earlier work may also obscure boundary conditions or interactions, such as moderation by trait domain, that require more sensitive detection.

Finally, the conceptual structure of prior DPB research has been underdeveloped. Most studies did not distinguish clearly between evaluative domains, treating traits such as competence, respect, or inspiration as loosely related rather than theoretically separable constructs. This limits the ability to test whether the DPB reflects a general evaluative halo or is selectively moralising. Moreover, earlier studies often relied on single-item or unvalidated measures and made little effort to connect observed patterns to broader models of person perception.

In this thesis, I address these limitations directly. I use large, pre-registered samples where applicable with sufficient power to detect main and interaction effects. I employ evaluatively ambiguous stimuli in Experiments 2–7 to reduce trait priming and familiarity-based confounds, refining the design from Experiment 1, which used a more neutral description without deliberately embedding ambiguity. Most critically, I apply a domain-based framework to structure evaluation across Sociability, Morality, and Competence, allowing for clearer tests of domain specificity and theoretical selectivity. By replacing high-status or personally known targets with unfamiliar, lay figures, I aim to determine whether the DPB arises under minimal evaluative cues, and what psychological mechanisms account for its emergence. This approach enables a more precise and generalisable account of when, where, and why the dead are judged more favourably than the living.

Present Research

Overview of Thesis Aims

In this thesis, I investigate the DPB across a broad range of targets, traits, and contexts. Prior research has documented the DPB in evaluations of high-status figures (e.g., CEOs, politicians: Allison & Eylon, 2005; Allison et al., 2009) and in personally familiar targets (e.g., friends, relatives: Hayes, 2016) but has not tested whether it generalises to targets who are both *lay* and *unfamiliar*. My thesis is the first to do so. Nor has it systematically assessed which interpersonal domains the bias most strongly affects. Accordingly, the present research pursues four overarching aims: (1) to test whether the DPB generalises to lay, unfamiliar targets; (2) to examine its domain specificity using the three-dimensional framework of Sociability, Morality, and Competence; (3) to identify boundary conditions such as group membership; and (4) to provide a theoretically grounded explanation of when and why the DPB arises.

Summary of Experiments and Logic of Design

My thesis comprises seven experiments and a meta-analytic synthesis, designed to investigate the DPB across trait domains, social contexts, and underlying mechanisms. In Experiment 1, I tested whether the DPB emerges when the target is described in emotionally neutral terms and lacks both social status and familiarity, i.e., a genuinely lay, unfamiliar individual. No effects were observed, indicating that mere knowledge of death was insufficient in this neutral context; in later studies using richer, ambiguous bios the DPB appeared, consistent with, but not confirming, the idea that interpretive latitude matters.

In Experiment 2, I introduced ambiguous vignettes to allow greater scope for evaluative reconstruction. Here, participants rated deceased targets as more likeable and more deserving of respect than living ones. This pattern is consistent with (but does not confirm) the idea that interpretive latitude facilitates the DPB, particularly on traits tied to interpersonal regard. In Experiment 3, I replicated the use of ambiguous vignettes and tested whether the DPB was moderated by group membership (ingroup [British] vs. outgroup [Andorran]). The DPB emerged on morality and respect but was not moderated by group, indicating that it generalises across social categories when the outgroup is neutral.

In Experiment 4, I extended this test to a more politically distant outgroup (Russian targets). The DPB emerged robustly in the domains of Sociability (warmth and liking) and Morality, and group membership again failed to moderate the effect. These findings suggest that the DPB extends even to disfavoured outgroups when hostility is not made explicit. In Experiment 5, I examined whether the DPB could be explained by participants' endorsement of social norms surrounding posthumous respect. Although the DPB emerged on liking, morality, and respect, norm endorsement did not moderate these effects.

In Experiment 6, I tested whether the DPB could be shaped by exposure to normative framing. Participants read messages that either endorsed or criticised the norm of speaking positively about the dead. The DPB emerged on warmth and liking and on the composite; competence was nonsignificant. Norm framing did not moderate the effect, indicating that the DPB operates independently of explicit normative cues.

In Experiment 7, I tested whether the DPB is moderated by communication goals, manipulating whether participants evaluated the target for a favourable or unfavourable audience. The DPB replicated across outcomes (status main effects), but the Status × Audience interaction did not survive familywise error control. Moreover, the manipulation likely conveyed additional social information about the target (that he was liked or disliked), complicating causal interpretation. I therefore treat this study as evidence that the DPB persists

under audience framing rather than as proof of causal moderation by audience; the results are consistent with, but do not establish, a socially sensitive account.

Across all experiments, I assessed interpersonal impressions using a domain-based evaluative framework comprising Sociability (liking, warmth), Morality (morality, respect), and Competence (competence). Trait order was randomised (except liking, which always appeared last), and all ratings used a 7-point scale. Warmth was added from Experiment 4 onward to better represent the Sociability domain. This consistent structure allowed for cross-study comparison and meta-analytic integration.

Together, these studies demonstrate that the DPB is not a universal response to death, but a selectively activated, context-sensitive bias. It is strongest in the Sociability and Morality domains and persisted across multiple contexts. Apparent increases in studies using richer, ambiguous bios and audience framing are suggestive, but claims of amplification remain inferential (a factorial ambiguity manipulation is a priority for future work). The final meta-analysis consolidates these patterns and confirms the DPB as a replicable, theoretically interpretable phenomenon in person perception.

Searching for the Death Positivity Bias in Lay Targets

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, I conducted a preliminary test of the Death Positivity Bias (DPB). Participants evaluated a fictional target described either as having recently died (experimental condition) or as still living (control condition). Evaluations focused on four traits: liking, competence, morality, and respect. I selected these traits to represent the interpersonal domains (Brambilla et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2007) of Sociability (liking), Morality (morality and respect), and Competence (competence). Allison et al. (2009) used liking and competence in prior DPB studies; I included morality because of its centrality in impression formation (Allison & Eylon, 2005; Wojciszke et al., 1998), and respect because it reflects a core lay expression of posthumous deference—an idea embedded in the cultural maxim “respect the dead.” I also computed a composite index (higher scores indicate a more favourable overall impression), aggregating all four traits to capture participants’ general evaluation of the target. Ancillary measures assessed wellbeing.

Method

Participants and Design

In total, 199 University of Southampton undergraduate students (168 women, 31 men) participated in a survey on eFolio, the student research participation portal, in exchange for course credit. They received a link to complete the survey on their home computer. They ranged

in age from 18 to 24 years (M = 19.99, SD = 1.36). A sensitivity power analysis (G*Power; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that, with N = 199, the study had 80% power to detect effects of $\eta^2 \geq .038$. Smaller effects may have gone undetected. The design comprised a single, between-subjects factor (target: dead vs. alive). I randomly assigned participants to conditions (dead n = 102, alive n = 97).

Procedure and Materials

All participants read a vignette describing the life of a fictional character named Ella. In this and all subsequent experiments (except Experiment 7), participants were informed that the vignette had been written by individuals over the age of 50 who had taken part in a previous study under instructions to describe someone they knew. I designed the vignette to present a neutral and typical description of Ella. That is, I deliberately selected her name, occupation, hobbies, and general life circumstances to portray her as an ordinary individual, in contrast to the high-status figures featured in earlier DPB studies (e.g., CEOs, celebrities, political leaders; Allison et al., 2005, 2009). In the dead condition, the vignette concluded by stating that Ella had died. In the alive condition, the vignette ended with the implication that Ella was still living.

After reading the vignette, participants evaluated Ella on the interpersonal domains of Sociability, Morality, and Competence (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). For *Sociability*, participants rated the target on liking: "I view(ed) Ella favourably," "Ella (is/was) likeable," and "I would want/have wanted to be Ella's friend" (M = 4.83, SD = 0.78, α = .85). For *Morality*, they rated the target both on morality and respect. With regard to morality: "Ella (is/was) a moral person," "Ella (is/was) a good person," and "Ella (is/was) an ethical person" (M = 4.66, SD = 0.72, α = .87). With regard to respect: "I respect(ed) Ella," "I admire(d) Ella," "Ella deserves/deserved to be revered," and "People should (have) respect(ed) Ella" (M = 4.39, SD = 0.81, α = .80). For *Competence*, they rated the target on competence: "Ella (is/was) competent," "Ella (is/was) effective at her job," and "Ella (is/was) intelligent" (M = 4.79, SD = 0.71, α = .80). I proceeded to derive a composite index (M = 4.67, SD = 0.63, α = .93), collapsing across all interpersonal domains.

Participants then completed a four-item ancillary measure referring to Ella's wellbeing: "Ella's welfare (is/was) important" (M = 5.00, SD = 0.92), "Ella lives/lived a good life" (M = 5.07, SD = 0.78), "Ella deserves/deserved a good life" (M = 5.18, SD = 0.86), and "Ella (is/was) a person of great value" (M = 4.84, SD = 0.97). Next, they were prompted to provide any open-ended thoughts about Ella.

Subsequently, participants responded to a two-item manipulation check. The first item asked: "The person in the description was a _____," with response options "Man," "Woman,"

or “Don’t know.” The second asked: “The person in the description was _____,” with options “Alive,” “Dead,” or “Don’t know.” Afterward, to probe for demand characteristics and assess participant interpretation of the experiment, I asked: “In your own words, what was the purpose of this study?” A majority of participants (*n* = 157) interpreted the task as concerning impression formation or the influence of descriptive information on person perception. For example, several wrote that the experiment aimed to examine “how descriptions influence our judgements of people we do not know,” or “how we make assumptions about people's personality and livelihood based on small extracts.” Some (*n* = 20) referenced others’ opinions or the social influence of descriptions. Only two participants explicitly mentioned the manipulation of target (dead vs. alive). In all, most participants did not detect the experimental manipulation, indicating successful masking of the hypothesis.

I also included four questions to assess potential distractions during participation. Most participants reported completing the experiment alone (*n* = 193), without background music (*n* = 147) or television (*n* = 186). Only six participants reported distractions of any kind, with free-text responses indicating minor disturbances such as background noise or brief social interactions. These results suggest that participants completed the experiment in a largely controlled, distraction-free environment.

Finally, participants answered demographic questions regarding their ethnicity, gender, and age. Of the 199 participants, the majority identified as British (*n* = 135). Other reported ethnicities included: Any other White background (*n* = 22), Indian (*n* = 8), Any other Asian background (*n* = 6), White and Asian (*n* = 4), Caribbean (*n* = 3), Chinese (*n* = 3), White and Black African (*n* = 3), African (*n* = 5), Pakistani (*n* = 2), White and Black Caribbean (*n* = 2), Any other ethnic group (*n* = 2), Any other Black background (*n* = 1), Any other mixed background (*n* = 1), American (*n* = 1), and Hispanic (*n* = 1). Finally, participants completed a mood repair task. In this and all reported experiments, all participants indicated that their primary language is English. I provide the full research protocol in Appendix A.

Results

I analysed the data with a series of one-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs). To control familywise error across the multiple dependent variables within each experiment, I applied a Bonferroni correction to the family comprising all trait outcomes plus the overall composite (two-tailed). Unless otherwise noted, *p* values are reported raw, and significance judgments reflect the corrected α (α = .05/k), with k = 5 when four traits and their composite were tested (Experiments 1–3) and k = 6 when five traits and their composite were tested (Experiments 4–7). In this and all subsequent experiments, demographic variables did not qualify any of the

results. Analyses for all experiments were conducted at the trait level unless otherwise noted; domain-level summaries are provided in the meta-analysis.

Manipulation Check

All 199 participants correctly identified Ella as a woman. In the dead condition all 102 participants indicated that she was dead, whereas in the alive condition all 97 participants correctly indicated that she was alive.

Target Evaluation

Interpersonal Domains. Participants in the dead target condition (M = 4.87, SD = 0.76) did not like Ella more than those in the alive target condition (M = 4.78, SD = 0.81), $F(1, 197)$ = .613, p = .435, η^2 = .003. Similarly, participants in the dead target condition (M = 4.80, SD = 0.72) did not rate Ella as more competent than those in the alive condition (M = 4.78, SD = 0.71), $F(1, 197)$ = 0.04, p = .838, η^2 < .001. Further, participants in the dead target condition (M = 4.64, SD = 0.71) did not view Ella as more moral compared to those in the alive condition (M = 4.68, SD = 0.73), F(1, 197) = .155, p = .695, η^2 = .001. Moreover, participants in the dead target condition (M = 4.37, SD = 0.80) did not show greater respect for Ella than those in the alive condition (M = 4.37, SD = 0.82), $F(1, 197)$ < .001, p = .984, η^2 < .001. Finally, participants in the dead target condition (M = 4.68, SD = 0.64) did not evaluate Ella more favourably overall than those in the alive condition (M = 4.66, SD = 0.61), as indicated by the composite index, $F(1, 197)$ = 0.04, p = .844, η^2 < .001. For ease of comparison across outcomes, the corresponding condition means, standard deviations, and p values are summarised in Table 2.

Ancillary Measures and Open-Ended Responses. Participants in the dead versus alive target condition did not respond significantly differently to the four ancillary items regarding Ella's wellbeing (Table 3). Also, open-ended responses (n = 61) varied. Most participants (n = 28) gave either minimal or dismissive answers (e.g., "no," "none") or left the comment field nearly blank. Some participants (n = 9) offered substantive impressions of the target, describing her as "boring," "kind," or "interesting." A good deal of responses (n = 24) did not fit clearly into either of these categories and so I classified them as "other," given that they often reflected vague or unrelated content (e.g., "Pretty stereotypical life, good she stays in contact w friends, I like that she went back to Luton to be close to family").

Discussion

In Experiment 1, I found no evidence for the DPB. Participants did not rate the deceased target more favourably than the living one on any interpersonal domain, namely, Sociability (liking), Morality (morality, respect), and Competence (competence, intelligence). Information regarding the death of a neutrally described, ordinary target does not enhance evaluations of

that target. However, this study was powered to detect only effects of approximately $\eta^2 \geq .038$; smaller effects may have gone undetected. Accordingly, the null pattern should be interpreted as inconclusive rather than definitive evidence of absence.

This null pattern is theoretically informative. It indicates that the DPB is not a simple positivity effect triggered by knowledge of a person's death but may instead depend on conditions that engage interpretation. The vignette in Experiment 1 described a socially ordinary individual in emotionally flat and non-diagnostic terms. Such content likely failed to activate the inferential mechanisms central to person perception.

It is possible that more ambiguous or open-ended descriptive content is required to elicit the DPB, that is, content that invites evaluative reconstruction or meaning-making (Bruner, 1990; Heider, 1958). In Experiment 2, I introduced vignettes that were ambiguous in tone and content, enabling a stronger test of whether the DPB can emerge in the case of increased interpretive latitude.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 1, I did not find evidence of the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) among unfamiliar, lay targets described neutrally. In Experiment 2, I tested whether the DPB emerges when such targets are described ambiguously. Ambiguity may give perceivers greater interpretive scope (Higgins et al., 1977; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991), particularly when evaluating a deceased target. I adapted vignettes from Sedikides (1990), each portraying an evaluatively mixed layperson. For instance, the statement "only rarely does he change his mind even when it might be better if he had" could be read as depicting persistence (favourably) or stubbornness (unfavourably). Such ambiguity encourages reliance on accessible constructs when forming impressions. I assumed that death information would activate positive rather than negative constructs, leading to more favourable evaluations of deceased targets.

I again organised dependent variables according to the interpersonal domains framework (Sociability, Morality, Competence; Fiske et al., 2007; Brambilla et al., 2011) and tested for the emergence of the DPB across these domains. I also introduced several methodological refinements. First, I included two vignettes (Alex and Sam) to permit internal replication. Second, I used androgynous names and matched pronouns to participant gender. Third, I adopted a 7-point response scale with a midpoint to increase sensitivity and reduce satisficing (Dillman et al., 2014; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Finally, I clarified and reworded ancillary items for consistency with the manipulation.

Method

Participants and Design

I tested 175 University of Southampton undergraduate students (156 women, 17 men, 2 undisclosed) in exchange for course credit, using the SONA research participation system and the iSurvey platform. Participants completed the experiment on their home computer. They ranged in age from 18 to 47 years (M = 19.41, SD = 2.59). A sensitivity power analysis (G*Power; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that, with N = 175, the study had 80% power to detect effects of $\eta^2 \geq .042$. Smaller effects may have gone undetected. The design was a 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (vignette: Alex vs. Sam) between-subjects factorial. I randomly assigned participants to conditions (dead × Alex n = 41, dead × Sam n = 50, alive x Alex n = 45, alive x Sam n = 39).

Procedure and Materials

Participants first responded to demographic questions regarding age, gender, and ethnicity. Of the 175 participants, the majority identified as British (n = 116). Other reported ethnicities included: Any other White background (n = 17), Chinese (n = 8), Any other Asian background (n = 5), Indian (n = 5), White and Asian (n = 5), Any other ethnic group (n = 4), African (n = 2), Irish (n = 2), Caribbean (n = 3), Any other mixed background (n = 1), Pakistani (n = 1), White and Black Caribbean (n = 1), and one participant who selected "Do not state" (n = 1). Then, participants read a vignette describing either Alex or Sam, who had either recently died or was alive. As mentioned, the vignettes were ambiguous. For example, Sam was portrayed as someone whose contacts with others "were surprisingly limited… [but who] felt he/she didn't really need to rely on anyone"—open to interpretation as either independent or aloof.

Participants then evaluated the target on three interpersonal domains: Sociability, Competence, Morality (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). For *Sociability*, participants rated target liking: "I view(ed) Alex/Sam favourably," "Alex/Sam (is/was) likeable," and "I would (have) want(ed) to be Alex/Sam's friend" (M = 4.72, SD = 1.13, α = .83). For *Morality*, they rated both target morality and target respect; for morality: "Alex/Sam (is/was) a moral person," "a good person," and "an ethical person" (M = 5.50, SD = 1.10, α = .87); for respect: "I respect(ed) Alex/Sam," "I admire(d) Alex/Sam," "Alex/Sam deserves/deserved to be revered," and "People should (have) respect(ed) Alex/Sam" (M = 4.76, SD = 1.12, α = .84). For *Competence*, they rated target competence: "Alex/Sam (is/was) competent," "Alex/Sam (is/was) effective at her job," and "Alex/Sam (is/was) intelligent" (M = 5.44, SD = 0.98, α = .73). I also derived a composite index (M = 5.12, SD = 0.87, α = .89), collapsing across the interpersonal domains.

Next, participants responded to four ancillary items: "Alex/Sam's welfare (is/was) important" (M = 5.98, SD = 1.04), "Alex/Sam lives/lived a good life" (M = 5.55, SD = 1.03), "Alex/Sam deserves/deserved a good life" (M = 6.21, SD = 0.96), "Alex/Sam (is/was) a person of

great value" (*M* = 5.50, *SD* = 1.11), and "Alex/Sam (is/was) intelligent" (*M* = 5.29, *SD* = 1.20). They were also invited to provide any additional impressions in a free-text comment field.

Participants then completed a single manipulation check: "The person in the description was _____" (Alive/Dead/Don't Know). Afterward, to probe awareness of the hypothesis, I asked participants: "In your own words, what was the purpose of this study?" Most participants (*n* = 171) interpreted the experiment as investigating impression formation or personality evaluation based on brief descriptions. None mentioned the manipulation of target, suggesting that the experiment aims remained successfully masked. An honesty check followed: "In your honest opinion, should we use your data in our analyses?" All 175 participants answered "yes," indicating high-quality engagement. Finally, participants completed a mood repair task. I provide the full research protocol in Appendix B.

Results

I analysed the data in a series of 2 (condition: dead vs. alive) × 2 (target: Alex vs. Sam) ANOVAs. Bonferroni-corrected α = .010 for five outcomes.

Manipulation Check

All 84 participants in the dead condition correctly indicated the target was deceased; all 91 participants in the alive condition correctly indicated the target was alive.

Target Evaluation

Interpersonal Domains. Participants in the dead condition (*M* = 4.89, *SD* = 1.03) showed a small, nonsignificant tendency to like the target more than those in the alive condition (*M* = 4.54, *SD* = 1.20), $F(1, 171) = 4.14$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2 = .024$. Further, liking did not differ between Alex (*M* = 4.71, *SD* = 1.13) and Sam (*M* = 4.73, *SD* = 1.13), $F(1, 171) = 0.004$, $p = .951$, $\eta^2 < .001$. The interaction was not significant either, $F(1, 171) = 0.08$, $p = .782$, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (*M* = 5.50, *SD* = 0.93) did not rate the target as more competent than those in the alive condition (*M* = 5.38, *SD* = 1.03), $F(1, 171) = 0.25$, $p = .617$, $\eta^2 = .001$. However, participants rated Sam (*M* = 5.76, *SD* = 0.86) as more competent than Alex (*M* = 5.12, *SD* = 0.99), $F(1, 171) = 20.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .107$. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 171) = 0.16$, $p = .690$, $\eta^2 = .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (*M* = 5.56, *SD* = 1.05) did not rate the target as more moral than those in the alive condition (*M* = 5.43, *SD* = 1.16), $F(1, 170) = 0.26$, $p = .614$, $\eta^2 = .002$. Participants perceived Sam (*M* = 5.91, *SD* = 0.97) as more moral than Alex (*M* = 5.19, *SD* = 1.15), $F(1, 170) = 14.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .076$. No significant interaction emerged, $F(1, 170) = 0.02$, $p = .898$, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.04, SD = 0.96) rated the target as more deserving of respect than those in the alive condition (M = 4.44, SD = 1.20), $F(1, 171) = 12.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .067$. There was no significant difference between Sam (M = 4.95, SD = 1.14), and Alex (M = 4.55, SD = 1.06), $F(1, 171) = 4.57$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .026$. The interaction was also not significant, $F(1, 170) = 0.29$, $p = .594$, $\eta^2 = .002$.

Finally, participants in the dead condition (M = 5.23, SD = 0.77) showed a positive trend toward rating the target more positively overall than those in the alive condition (M = 4.90, SD = 0.94), $F(1, 171) = 5.41$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2 = .031$, but this did not survive Bonferroni correction. Participants gave higher overall ratings to Sam (M = 5.28, SD = 0.83) than to Alex (M = 4.87, SD = 0.87), $F(1, 171) = 9.18$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .051$. The interaction between target and vignette was not significant, $F(1, 171) = 0.05$, $p = .816$, $\eta^2 < .001$. For ease of comparison across outcomes, the corresponding condition means, standard deviations, and p values are summarised in Table 4.

Open-Ended Responses and Ancillary Measures. Participants in the dead target condition did not respond significantly differently compared to those in the alive target condition on the four ancillary items regarding Sam's/Alex's wellbeing (Table 5). A total of 97 participants provided open-ended responses about the vignette target. These varied in length and content. Trait-based interpretations (e.g., describing the target as "independent," "reserved," or "curious") appeared in 11 responses. Six participants speculated about the target's emotional state or inner motivations, such as a desire for acceptance or a search for identity. One response reflected ambivalence, suggesting that the target could be seen as both favourably and unfavourably. Thirty responses were minimal or dismissive (e.g., "no," "n/a"), and 49 did not fit clearly into any category and were classified as "other." The prevalence of interpretive and speculative responses indicates that the ambiguous vignettes were more evocative than the neutral ones used in Experiment 1, providing participants with greater latitude to construct meaning in their social inferences, thereby enabling the emergence of the DPB.

Discussion

In Experiment 2, I observed selective evidence for the DPB under evaluative ambiguity. After Bonferroni correction, the manipulation increased respect for the target (i.e., outward-facing deference), whereas effects on liking, morality, competence, and the overall composite did not meet the corrected criterion. Thus, the clearest early signal of the DPB appeared on an evaluative judgement closely tied to culturally normative regard. Sensitivity indicated detection only for effects $\eta^2 \geq .042$; the liking ($\eta^2 \approx .025$) and composite ($\eta^2 \approx .035$) trends were therefore underpowered and should be interpreted cautiously.

The pattern fits the theoretical role of ambiguity. Relative to the neutral vignette in Experiment 1, the ambiguous biographies in Experiment 2 invited interpretation. When information is indeterminate, perceivers may rely on accessible cultural heuristics (e.g., norms of reverence toward the deceased), yielding selective uplift on deference-related judgements (Bruner & Tagiuri, 1954; Higgins et al., 1982; Schneider, 1973). However, because I did not directly compare ambiguous and neutral vignettes within this experiment, the role of ambiguity is inferred rather than established.

Two ancillary patterns are noteworthy but orthogonal to the DPB: across conditions, Sam was rated higher than Alex on competence and morality, and also on the composite. These target differences likely reflect vignette content rather than the mortality manipulation.

Open-ended responses indicated active meaning-making, consistent with the intended manipulation of interpretive richness. This early pattern suggests, but not yet demonstrates, that posthumous positivity may be easier to detect when evaluative cues are underdetermined. In Experiment 3, I examine whether group membership influences this emerging pattern of selective posthumous evaluation.

Group Membership and the Death Positivity Bias

Experiment 3

In Experiment 3, I tested whether the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) would replicate with a new sample and whether its magnitude would be moderated by group membership—that is, by whether the target belonged to the participant's ingroup or to a neutral outgroup. Specifically, the target was described as either British (ingroup) or Andorran (outgroup). This manipulation enabled me to assess whether the DPB reflects a general evaluative tendency that applies across social categories, or whether it is stronger when the deceased shares the perceiver's group identity.

I retained the ambiguous vignette format from Experiment 2 but used only the *Sam* vignette, which had produced stronger trait ratings and a more pronounced DPB. Participants were randomly assigned to evaluate either Sam (British) or Ángel (Andorran), described as either dead or alive.

Methodologically, I initiated several refinements. To begin, I recruited participants via Prolific (https://www.prolific.co), a crowdsourcing platform shown to yield high-quality data from demographically diverse samples (Peer et al., 2017). I also removed ancillary and open-ended measures from earlier experiments, as these had not produced consistent or theoretically informative findings.

Method

Participants and Design

I recruited 400 Prolific workers residing in the United Kingdom. They completed the survey on their home computer in exchange for £1.05 (approximately 7 minutes; £9/hour). I excluded 69 participants who failed the manipulation check and 15 who left multiple incomplete responses. The final sample consisted of 327 participants (164 women, 163 men), aged 18 to 76 years (M = 39.97, SD = 13.24). A sensitivity power analysis (G*Power; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that, with N = 327, the study had 80% power to detect effects of $\eta^2 \geq .025$; smaller effects may have gone undetected. Planned Target × Group interactions were expected to be small ($\approx \eta^2$ .01); accordingly, the study was powered for main effects but underpowered for such interactions, and interaction tests are interpreted cautiously. The design was a 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (group: ingroup [Sam] vs. outgroup [Angel]) between-subjects factorial. I randomly assigned participants to conditions (dead × ingroup n = 89; dead × outgroup n = 84; alive × ingroup n = 70; alive × outgroup n = 84).

Procedure and Materials

Participants first answered demographic questions. Of the 327 participants, the majority identified as British (n = 268). Other reported ethnicities included: Any other White background (n = 10), Bangladeshi (n = 6), Indian (n = 6), White and Asian (n = 6), Irish (n = 5), Any other Asian background (n = 4), Any other mixed background (n = 4), Caribbean (n = 4), Pakistani (n = 4), African (n = 3), American (n = 2), Chinese (n = 1), and one participant who selected “Do not state” (n = 1). Then, participants read a vignette describing either Sam (British; ingroup) or Angel (Andorran; neutral outgroup), a target purportedly being either dead or alive. I adapted this vignette from Sam’s vignette of Experiment 2, with name and nationality modified to reflect corresponding group membership.

After reading the vignette, participants evaluated the target on five interpersonal domains (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). To assess Sociability, they rated: “I view Sam/Angel favourably,” “Sam/Angel (is/was) likeable,” and “I would (have) want(ed) to be Sam/Angel’s friend” (M = 5.14, SD = 1.37, α = .90). For Morality, they rated: “Sam/Angel (is/was) a moral person,” “a good person,” and “an ethical person” (M = 5.83, SD = 0.96, α = .90). For respect, they rated: “I respect(ed) Sam/Angel,” “I admire(d) Sam/Angel,” “Sam/Angel (deserves/deserved) to be revered,” and “People should (have) respect(ed) Sam/Angel” (M = 5.07, SD = 1.15, α = .88). To assess Competence, they rated: “Sam/Angel (is/was) competent,” “effective at their job,” and “intelligent” (M = 5.71, SD = 0.89, α = .83). I proceeded to derive a composite index (M = 5.44, SD = 0.87, α = .93), collapsing across all interpersonal domains.

Participants then answered two manipulation check items: “What country was the person from?” (United Kingdom/Andorra/Other), and “The person in the description was _____” (Alive/Dead/Don’t Know). Participants also answered an open-ended question about the experiment’s purpose. Only six mentioned death, and six mentioned nationality, but none identified these features as experimental manipulations. Some participants (n = 15) described the experiment as about impression formation or character judgement, whereas others mentioned memory (n = 4) or expressed suspicion (n = 5), but without identifying the experimental hypothesis. These patterns suggest minimal demand characteristics. Finally, participants completed a mood repair task. I provide the stimulus materials in Appendix C.

Results

I analysed the data in a series of 2 (condition: dead vs. alive) × 2 (group: ingroup [British] vs. outgroup [Andorran]) ANOVAs. Bonferroni-corrected α = .010 for five outcomes.

Manipulation Check

All 327 participants correctly identified the target’s nationality and gender: 173 correctly identified the target as deceased and 154 identified the target as alive.

Target Evaluation

Interpersonal Domains. Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.24, SD = 1.10) did not like the target more than those in the alive condition (M = 5.04, SD = 1.17), $F(1, 323) = 2.60$, p = .108, η^2 = .008. Liking did not significantly differ between Sam (M = 5.13, SD = 1.13) and Angel (M = 5.15, SD = 1.15), $F(1, 323) = 0.09$, p = .762, $\eta^2 < .001$. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 323) = 0.00$, p = .981, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.74, SD = 0.88) did not rate the target as more competent than those in the alive condition (M = 5.69, SD = 0.89), $F(1, 321) = 0.23$, p = .631, η^2 = .001. Competence ratings did not significantly differ between Sam (M = 5.72, SD = 0.89) and Angel (M = 5.71, SD = 0.88), $F(1, 321) < 0.01$, p = .999, $\eta^2 < .001$. Further, the interaction was not significant, $F(1, 321) = 0.00$, p = .985, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.95, SD = 0.87) showed a positive trend toward rating the target as more moral than those in the alive condition (M = 5.69, SD = 1.04), $F(1, 321)$ = 5.73, p = .017, η^2 = .018, but this did not survive Bonferroni correction. Morality ratings did not significantly differ between Sam (M = 5.90, SD = 0.89) and Angel (M = 5.76, SD = 1.02), $F(1, 321)$ = 1.41, p = .236, η^2 = .004. The interaction was not significant either, $F(1, 321) = 0.13$, p = .715, η^2 < .001.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.25, SD = 1.09) rated the target as more deserving of respect than those in the alive condition (M = 4.86, SD = 1.18), $F(1, 323) = 9.74$, p =

.002, η^2 = .029. Respect ratings did not significantly differ between Sam (*M* = 5.06, *SD* = 1.14) and Angel (*M* = 5.08, *SD* = 1.16), *F*(1, 323) = 0.12, *p* = .730, η^2 < .001. No significant interaction emerged, *F*(1, 323) = 0.00, *p* = .961, η^2 < .001.

Finally, participants in the dead condition (*M* = 5.55, *SD* = 0.81 showed a positive trend toward rating the target more positively overall than those in the alive condition (*M* = 5.32, *SD* = 0.93), *F*(1, 323) = 5.60, *p* = .019, η^2 = .017, but this did not survive Bonferroni correction. These evaluations did not statistically differ between Sam (*M* = 5.46, *SD* = 0.86) and Angel (*M* = 5.42, *SD* = 0.89), *F*(1, 323) = 0.03, *p* = .874, η^2 < .001. The interaction was not significant, *F*(1, 323) = 0.57, *p* = .451, η^2 = .002. For ease of comparison across outcomes, the corresponding condition means, standard deviations, and p values are summarised in Table 6.

Open-Ended Responses. A total of 229 participants offered open-ended comments about the vignette target. The majority of responses (*n* = 217) were too brief or general to categorise. However, a small number of participants engaged with the ambiguity of the vignette by inferring positive traits such as kindness or warmth (*n* = 6), or describing the target as introverted or reserved (*n* = 4). Some responses also referred to the target's emotional wellbeing (*n* = 1) or expressed uncertainty in their interpretation (*n* = 1). No participants referred to the target with clearly negative traits or made explicit moral judgements. These patterns suggest that, although a few participants reflected on the target's character, most gave minimal written input, likely because they had already expressed their evaluations through the preceding quantitative ratings.

Discussion

Experiment 3 replicated Experiment 2, and tested whether group membership moderated the DPB. After Bonferroni correction, the death cue selectively increased respect for the target (Morality domain), while effects on liking, competence, morality, and the overall composite did not meet the corrected criterion (morality and the composite showed positive trends, *p*s = .017 and .019, respectively). Thus, as in Experiment 2, the clearest signal of the DPB again appeared on an outward-facing, deference-related judgement.

The absence of corrected-significant effects on competence again suggests that competence is comparatively resistant to posthumous elevation for ordinary lay targets. Prior demonstrations of competence boosts often involve high-status figures (e.g., CEOs, celebrities), for whom ability is focal and reputationally valued; in the present context, competence may be less diagnostic or simply require stronger contextual prompts to shift.

Group membership did not moderate the DPB: deceased ingroup (British) and neutral outgroup (Andorran) targets were evaluated similarly. This null moderation implies that, at least

in non-antagonistic intergroup contexts, the DPB generalises across social categories. The absence of main effects of group membership across dependent variables suggests that category differences may have been psychologically weak or contextually non-salient in this paradigm (e.g., limited antagonism cued by materials). Thus, null group effects should not be taken as evidence that intergroup evaluations are equivalent in general, only that they were not reliably engaged here.

More broadly, the use of more interpretively open biographies coincided with selective posthumous uplift—most reliably on judgements aligned with cultural norms of deference (respect). Together with Experiment 2, these results indicate that the DPB is not a blanket positivity effect; rather, under informational ambiguity it preferentially enhances evaluations tied to interpersonal regard and normative remembrance, while leaving competence largely unchanged.

Experiment 4

In preregistered Experiment 4 (https://aspredicted.org/535q-7pcc.pdf) , I tested whether the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) extends to targets belonging to a socially distant and politically charged outgroup: Russians. This design provided a stronger test of whether the DPB generalises across group boundaries, even when the target belongs to a disfavoured or adversarial group. I selected this outgroup based on polling data showing that Russia ranks among Britons' most negatively viewed countries (YouGov, 2020). Although North Korea was rated even less favourably, I excluded it because it would have been implausible to present the vignette—purportedly written by someone acquainted with the target—as originating from that country.

I introduced two procedural changes. First, I added *warmth* as a dependent measure (alongside *liking*) to more comprehensively represent the Sociability domain. Warmth is a central dimension of person perception (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2007). Second, I randomised the order of trait rating blocks (excluding *liking*, which always appeared last) to minimise order effects. I retained *liking* to the end because it represents a global, integrative judgement that could otherwise influence more specific trait ratings if presented earlier. This procedural refinement was retained in all subsequent experiments.

I hypothesised that participants would evaluate deceased targets more positively than living targets, replicating the DPB. I also explored whether group membership would moderate this effect, that is, whether the DPB would be attenuated or absent for Russian (outgroup) targets relative to British (ingroup) ones. A significant interaction between target status and group membership would suggest that antagonistic outgroups represent a boundary condition

for the DPB. Conversely, a non-significant interaction would indicate that the bias transcends group boundaries, generalising even to negatively stereotyped targets.

Method

Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis (GPower; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that N = 128 would be sufficient to detect a medium-sized main effect ($\eta^2 = .059$) with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$). In anticipation of attrition, I recruited 176 University of Southampton undergraduate students, who completed the survey on their home computer. I excluded 11 who failed the manipulation check, three who responded "no" to an honesty item asking whether their data should be included in the analysis, and one whose data were incomplete. The final sample comprised 161 participants (age range: 18–22 years; *M* = 19.28, *SD* = 1.24). A sensitivity power analysis (GPower) indicated that, with *N* = 161, the study had 80% power to detect effects of $\eta^2 \geq .046$; smaller effects may have gone undetected. The design was a 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (group: ingroup [British] vs. outgroup [Russian]) between-subjects factorial. I randomly assigned participants to conditions (dead × ingroup *n* = 39; dead × outgroup *n* = 46; alive × ingroup *n* = 43; alive × outgroup *n* = 43). Although the Target × Group interaction was specified a priori, it was expected to be small ($\approx \eta^2$ .01–.02); with *N* = 161 the study was underpowered for such effects. Accordingly, interaction tests are interpreted cautiously, and their nulls are non-diagnostic; the sample was powered primarily for main effects.

Procedure and Materials

First, participants responded to demographic questions. Of the 161 participants, most identified as White (*n* = 133). Other reported ethnicities included: Black or Black British (*n* = 10), Mixed (*n* = 8), Asian or Asian British (*n* = 8), and Other (*n* = 2). Then, participants read a vignette describing either Sam (British) or Alexei/Alexina (Russian), who was either dead or alive. I matched the vignette's gendered pronouns to the participant's gender. The content was based on the Sam vignette from Experiments 2–3, modified only in name and nationality. I replaced the phrase "climbed Snowdon" with "climbed mountains" to preserve plausibility for a Russian target.

Participants learned that the vignette had been written by someone in a prior study who knew the target personally, and that descriptions of Russian targets had been translated from Cyrillic. The vignette depicted the target in an evaluatively ambiguous manner. For example, the target "felt he/she didn't really need to rely on anyone" and had "surprisingly limited" contact with others—phrasing that could be interpreted positively (independence) or negatively (social aloofness).

To assess warmth, participants rated: "[NAME] (is/was) a warm person," "[NAME] (is/was) a tolerant person," "[NAME] (is/was) a good-natured person" (M = 3.99, SD = 0.94, α = .82). Participants assessed competence (M = 5.86, SD = 0.77, α = .71), morality (M = 5.38, SD = 0.94, α = .83), respect (M = 4.56, SD = 1.03, α = .77), and liking (M = 4.11, SD = 1.30, α = .90), using three- or four-item measures, as in Experiments 1–3. I blocked dependent measures (warmth, competence, morality, respect) in random order, except for liking, which appeared last to avoid carryover effects.

Multi-item scales indexed traits (Warmth, Competence, Morality, Respect, and Liking). Unless otherwise stated, analyses were conducted at the trait level. Domain-level composites (Sociability = Warmth & Liking; Morality = Morality & Respect) are summarised meta-analytically rather than tested as primary outcomes here. Trait blocks (Warmth, Competence, Morality, Respect) were randomised; Liking was always presented last to avoid carryover.

Participants then answered three manipulation check items: "What country was the person from?" (United Kingdom/Russia/Other), "The person in the description was a _____" (Man/Woman/Non-Binary/Don't Know), and "The person in the description was _____" (Alive/Dead/Don't Know). Reported in results. Participants were also asked what they thought the experimental purpose was. The majority (n = 88) mentioned general impression formation (e.g., "judging personality," "forming assumptions"), and a minority (n = 45) mentioned the descriptive format or character traits. Only 16 participants referred to the target (i.e., being dead or alive) or the target's nationality, and none identified the experimental manipulation. The critical design features were successfully masked. Lastly, participants completed the same mood repair task used in previous experiments. I provide the full research protocol in Appendix D.

Results

I analysed the data using a series of 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (group: ingroup [British] vs. outgroup [Russian]) ANOVAs. Bonferroni-corrected α = .0083 for six outcomes.

Manipulation Check

All 161 participants correctly identified the target's country and gender. In the dead condition, 75 participants indicated the target was deceased; in the alive condition, 86 identified the target as alive.

Target Evaluation

Interpersonal Domains. Participants in the dead condition (M = 4.41, SD = 0.97) showed a positive trend toward rating the target as warmer than those in the alive condition (M = 4.05, SD = 1.24), $F(1, 157) = 4.11$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = .026$, but this did not survive Bonferroni correction.

Warmth ratings did not significantly differ between Sam (M = 4.33, SD = 1.15) and Alexei/Alexina (M = 4.10, SD = 1.10), $F(1, 157) = 2.00$, $p = .160$, $\eta^2 = .013$. The interaction was also not significant, $F(1, 157) = 2.53$, $p = .114$, $\eta^2 = .016$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.18, SD = 0.97) showed a positive trend toward rating the target as more likeable than those in the alive condition (M = 4.69, SD = 1.32), $F(1, 156) = 7.00$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .043$, but this did not survive Bonferroni correction. Liking ratings did not significantly differ between Alexei/Alexina (M = 4.76, SD = 1.13) and Sam (M = 5.07, SD = 1.24), $F(1, 156) = 2.64$, $p = .106$, $\eta^2 = .017$. Further, the interaction was not significant, $F(1, 156) = 0.01$, $p = .905$, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 6.08, SD = 0.81) did not rate the target as more competent than those in the alive condition (M = 5.95, SD = 0.74), $F(1, 157) = 1.21$, $p = .273$, $\eta^2 = .008$. Competence ratings did not significantly differ between Sam (M = 6.07, SD = 0.74) and Alexei/Alexina (M = 5.95, SD = 0.81), $F(1, 157) = 1.15$, $p = .285$, $\eta^2 = .007$. No significant interaction emerged, $F(1, 157) = 0.48$, $p = .490$, $\eta^2 = .003$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 6.07, SD = 0.91) rated the target as more moral than those in the alive condition (M = 5.54, SD = 1.11), $F(1, 156) = 10.46$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .063$. Morality ratings did not significantly differ between Sam (M = 5.82, SD = 1.15) and Alexei/Alexina (M = 5.74, SD = 0.94), $F(1, 156) = 0.29$, $p = .591$, $\eta^2 = .002$. Moreover, the interaction was not significant, $F(1, 156) = 1.35$, $p = .248$, $\eta^2 = .009$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.37, SD = 1.00) rated the target as more deserving of respect than those in the alive condition (M = 4.83, SD = 1.31), $F(1, 157) = 8.30$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .050$. Respect ratings did not significantly differ between Sam (M = 5.23, SD = 1.23) and Alexei/Alexina (M = 4.92, SD = 1.15), $F(1, 157) = 2.70$, $p = .102$, $\eta^2 = .017$. No significant interaction emerged either, $F(1, 157) = 0.90$, $p = .344$, $\eta^2 = .006$.

Finally, overall, participants in the dead condition (M = 5.42, SD = 0.69) evaluated the target more favourably than those in the alive condition (M = 5.01, SD = 0.97), $F(1, 157) = 9.30$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .056$. No difference was found in participants' ratings of Sam (M = 5.31, SD = 0.93) and Alexei/Alexina (M = 5.09, SD = 0.80), $F(1, 157) = 2.57$, $p = .111$, $\eta^2 = .016$. The interaction was also not significant, $F(1, 157) = 1.26$, $p = .264$, $\eta^2 = .008$. For ease of comparison across outcomes, the corresponding condition means, standard deviations, and p values are summarised in Table 7.

Discussion

In Experiment 4, I examined whether the DPB extends to a socially distant, politically disfavoured outgroup. After Bonferroni correction, death increased evaluations on morality,

respect, and the composite index. Effects on warmth (p = .044) and liking (p = .009) were positive but did not meet the corrected criterion, and competence remained null. This pattern replicates the selective DPB observed earlier—strongest for deference- and virtue-related judgements—and shows that the bias survives when the target belongs to a rival outgroup.

Group membership did not moderate the DPB: deceased Russian and British targets were evaluated similarly, and all Target × Group interactions were nonsignificant. Thus, in non-threatening intergroup contexts, the DPB appears to generalise across category boundaries. At the same time, the absence of effects on competence and the sub-threshold sociability results suggest that posthumous uplift concentrates on moral appraisal and normative deference rather than ability-based judgements. Parallel to Experiment 3, the absence of main effects of group membership indicates that our materials likely did not heighten antagonism or category salience sufficiently to shift baseline evaluations.

Taken together, these findings are consistent with the idea that more interpretively open biographies facilitate selective sociomoral uplift, and further constrain the DPB's scope: it robustly elevates moral worth and respect even for an unsympathetic outgroup, while sociability signals show only suggestive trends under the present parameters. Next, I test a proposed mechanism—whether endorsement of social norms about speaking of the dead helps to explain this selective uplift.

Social Norms and the Death Positivity Bias

Experiment 5

Having established that the DPB emerges most reliably under conditions of evaluative ambiguity, extends across outgroup boundaries, and is unmoderated by group membership, in preregistered Experiment 5 (https://aspredicted.org/rpcq-b7gp.pdf), I re-tested its replicability and examined whether the bias is moderated by individual differences in social norm endorsement. After reconsidering the construct, I revised the originally planned mediation analysis to a moderation framework. For transparency, the preregistered mediation analysis and results are reported in Appendix E. This change reflects the thesis-wide treatment of norm endorsement as a stable, internalised disposition (pp. 60, 63, 69) that is theoretically unlikely to be influenced by the target-status manipulation. Conceptually, moderation therefore provides a more appropriate test of whether such dispositions condition the DPB, and it maintains analytic consistency with Experiment 6. Moderation was tested separately for three indices of norm endorsement: the SNES general subscale, a death-specific subscale, and an overall index.

Social norm endorsement refers to the extent to which individuals affirm culturally shared expectations about appropriate behaviour (Bizer et al., 2013). These norms can be general (e.g., beliefs about conformity and social order) or context-specific (e.g., expectations governing how one should speak of the dead). I reasoned that participants who more strongly endorsed such norms, particularly those relevant to posthumous evaluation, would be more inclined to evaluate deceased targets favourably. Conceptually, moderation would be supported if the magnitude of the target-status effect (dead vs. alive) varied systematically across levels of norm endorsement.

To test these hypotheses, participants first read a short vignette describing a lay target as either dead or alive, then completed the norm endorsement measure before evaluating the target. I also refined the trait evaluation format: rather than repeating full statements (e.g., "NAME is/was a warm person"), I used a common stem ("NAME is/was…") followed by trait phrases (e.g., "…a warm person," "…a tolerant person"). This reduced redundancy and encouraged more efficient, focused responding. I hypothesised that participants would evaluate deceased targets more favourably than living ones (replicating the DPB; H_1) and that social norm endorsement would moderate this effect, such that the DPB would be stronger among high endorsers (H_2).

Method

Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis (G*Power; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that a sample of 128 would be sufficient to detect a medium effect ($\eta^2 = .059$) with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$) in a two-way ANOVA. In total, 190 Prolific workers residing in the United Kingdom completed the survey on their home computer in exchange for £2.00 (approximately 10 minutes; £12/hour). As preregistered, I excluded 34 for correctly identifying the experiment's purpose, six for failing the manipulation check, and two whose response times fell beyond ±3 SD from the mean. The final sample consisted of 148 participants (97 women, 48 men, 3 nonbinary), aged 20 to 74 years (M = 42.99, SD = 13.84). A sensitivity power analysis (G*Power; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that, with N = 148, the study had 80% power to detect effects of $\eta^2 \geq .050$. Smaller effects may have gone undetected. The design was a 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (vignette: Sam vs. Alex) between-subjects factorial. I randomly assigned participants to conditions (dead × Sam n = 37, dead × Alex n = 31, alive × Sam n = 38, alive × Alex n = 42). For moderation analyses, predictors were mean-centred, target status was coded 0 = alive, 1 = dead, and hierarchical regressions entered Status and Norm endorsement at Step 1 and their product term (Status × Norm endorsement) at Step 2; multicollinearity was minimal (all VIFs < 2).

Procedure and Materials

Participants answered demographic questions pertaining to their age, gender, and ethnicity. Of the 148 participants, most identified as White (*n* = 124). Other reported ethnicities included: Asian or Asian British (*n* = 14), Black or Black British (*n* = 7), Other (*n* = 2), and Mixed (*n* = 1). Then, participants read a vignette about either Alex or Sam, who was described as either deceased or alive. The vignettes reproduced the same evaluatively ambiguous description of a layperson as in Experiment 2.

Immediately after reading the vignette, participants completed the 12-item Norm Espousal Scale (SNES; α = .88; Appendix E). The scale consisted of two six-item subscales. The general norm subscale, adapted from Bizer et al. (2013), measured endorsement of conventional expectations (e.g., "If more people followed society's rules, the world would be a better place"; α = .87), though I omitted direct references to "rules" or "norms" to reduce demand characteristics. The death-specific subscale included six new items I created to assess beliefs about how the deceased should be treated (e.g., "We should not badmouth dead people, although we may need to do so with the living"; α = .93). SNES–Overall: *M* = 3.38, *SD* = 0.91, observed range = 1.42 – 5.83; SNES–general norms: *M* = 4.23, *SD* = 1.01, observed range = 1.83 – 7.00; SNES–Death-specific: *M* = 2.52, *SD* = 1.25, observed range = 1.00 – 7.00. Score distributions showed adequate spread with no floor/ceiling compression.

Participants then evaluated the target on five traits representing the three interpersonal domains, as in Experiment 4: Sociability (warmth, liking), Morality (morality, respect), and Competence (competence). They responded to a common stem ("Alex/Sam is/was…") followed by scale items. I measured warmth (*M* = 4.23, *SD* = 1.15, α = .83), competence (*M* = 4.97, *SD* = 0.77, α = .75), morality (*M* = 5.47, *SD* = 0.96, α = .85), respect (*M* = 4.80, *SD* = 1.15, α = .88), and liking (*M* = 4.80, *SD* = 1.22, α = .90) using the same items as in Experiment 3. I proceeded to derive a composite index (M = 5.06, SD = .84, α = .93), collapsing across all domains. Participants then completed a single manipulation check: "The person in the description is/was _____" (Alive/Dead/Don't Know).

To assess awareness of the hypothesis, participants were asked: "In your own words, what was the purpose of this study?" A total of 148 participants provided responses. Most participants (*n* = 75) gave vague or idiosyncratic answers. Some (*n* = 34) reported impression formation or trait evaluation. A smaller subset mentioned death (*n* = 22), whether the target was dead or alive (*n* = 3), norms (*n* = 2), respect (*n* = 2), or empathy (*n* = 1). Only nine participants expressed uncertainty or explicitly stated they did not know. Notably, no participant identified both manipulated variables (target and vignette), and none correctly inferred the hypothesis.

Finally, participants completed the same mood repair task used in Experiments 1–3. I provide the full research protocol in Appendix E.

Results

I analysed the data in a series of 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (name: Alex vs. Sam) ANOVAs. Bonferroni-corrected α = .0083 for six outcomes.

Manipulation Check

All 148 participants passed the check, correctly identifying whether the target was dead or alive.

Target Evaluation

Interpersonal Domains. Participants in the dead condition (M = 4.30, SD = 1.17) did not rate the target as warmer than those in the alive condition (M = 4.17, SD = 1.14), $F(1, 144) = 0.46$, $p = .499$, $\eta^2 = .003$. Warmth ratings did not significantly differ between Alex (M = 4.22, SD = 1.13) and Sam (M = 4.24, SD = 1.18), $F(1, 144) = 0.03$, $p = .868$, $\eta^2 < .001$. The interaction was trending, $F(1, 144) = 3.40$, $p = .067$, $\eta^2 = .023$, with the DPB being slightly more pronounced for Sam.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.05, SD = 1.11) did not rate the target as more likeable than those in the alive condition (M = 4.60, SD = 1.27), $F(1, 144) = 5.11$, $p = .025$, $\eta^2 = .034$. Liking ratings did not significantly differ between Alex (M = 4.78, SD = 1.27) and Sam (M = 4.83, SD = 1.17), $F(1, 144) = 0.01$, $p = .936$, $\eta^2 < .001$. No interaction emerged, $F(1, 144) = 0.01$, $p = .941$, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 6.07, SD = 0.75) did not rate the target as significantly more competent than those in the alive condition (M = 5.89, SD = 0.78), $F(1, 144) = 2.69$, $p = .103$, $\eta^2 = .018$. Also, competence ratings did not differ between Alex (M = 6.13, SD = 0.78) and Sam (M = 5.81, SD = 0.73), $F(1, 144) = 7.16$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .047$. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 144) = 0.001$, $p = .972$, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.65, SD = 1.04) did not rate the target as more moral than those in the alive condition (M = 5.33, SD = 0.86), $F(1, 144) = 5.21$, $p = .024$, $\eta^2 = .035$. Further, morality ratings did not differ between Alex (M = 5.66, SD = 0.93) and Sam (M = 5.29, SD = 0.95), $F(1, 144) = 6.62$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .044$. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 144) = 0.38$, $p = .540$, $\eta^2 = .003$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.00, SD = 1.12) did not rate the target as more deserving of respect than those in the alive condition (M = 4.62, SD = 1.15), $F(1, 144) = 4.00$, $p = .047$, $\eta^2 = .027$. Respect ratings did not differ significantly between Alex (M = 4.76, SD = 1.21)

and Sam (M = 4.83, SD = 1.09), F(1, 144) = 0.06, p = .804, η^2 < .001. The interaction was not significant, F(1, 144) = 0.17, p = .678, η^2 = .001.

Finally, overall, participants did not evaluate the target more favourably in the dead condition (M = 5.21, SD = 0.82) than in the alive condition (M = 4.92, SD = 0.83), F(1, 144) = 4.89, p = .029, η^2 = .033. Composite scores did not differ significantly between Alex (M = 5.11, SD = 0.84) and Sam (M = 5.00, SD = 0.83), F(1, 144) = 0.86, p = .355, η^2 = .006. The interaction was not significant, F(1, 144) = 0.27, p = .607, η^2 = .002. For ease of comparison across outcomes, the corresponding condition means, standard deviations, and p values are summarised in Table 8.

Moderation Analysis

To examine whether the DPB was moderated by endorsement of social norms, I conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regressions for each dependent variable. In Step 1, I entered target status (0 = alive, 1 = dead) and mean-centred norm endorsement; in Step 2, I entered the interaction term (Status × Norm endorsement). Separate models were run for general, death-specific, and overall norm endorsement. Predictors were mean-centred and the interaction term was computed as Status × centred Norm endorsement.

As shown in Table 9, none of the Status × Norm endorsement interactions were significant for warmth (βs = −.23 to .02, all ps ≥ .119), liking (βs = −.10 to .11, all ps ≥ .552), competence (βs = −.07 to .03, all ps ≥ .574), morality (βs = −.05 to −.02, all ps ≥ .789), respect (βs = −.17 to .01, all ps ≥ .263), or the overall composite (βs = −.10 to .01, all ps ≥ .378). Across all dependent variables, ΔR^2 values were ≤ .016, indicating that the interaction terms explained negligible additional variance. These results suggest that the effect of target status on evaluations was consistent across levels of norm endorsement. Because no interaction was significant, simple slopes were not probed.

Discussion

Experiment 5 tested moderation by norm endorsement (not mediation), treating norm endorsement as a relatively stable disposition; accordingly, all analyses modelled Norm Endorsement as a moderator of Status. After applying the prespecified Bonferroni correction across outcomes within the experiment (k = 6), none of the status effects reached the adjusted significance threshold. Effects on liking, morality, respect, and the composite were directionally positive but nonsignificant; warmth and competence were also nonsignificant. Thus, in this sample the DPB did not reliably emerge at the trait or composite level once familywise error was controlled. The warmth × name interaction showed a small, nonsignificant trend (p = .067), suggesting the possibility of stimulus-specific sensitivity, but I do not interpret this further. Given that the norm measure followed the vignette, the order of measurement may

have attenuated moderation tests that assume independence between predictors and the status manipulation.

Why might Experiment 5 yield weaker evidence than earlier studies? First, the Bonferroni procedure is conservative and reduces power; several outcomes showed raw p values in the .02–.05 range that would typically be considered significant absent multiplicity adjustment. Second, with N = 148 and meta-analytic effects in the small range, tests had limited sensitivity after correction, so nulls are compatible with small positive true effects. Third, minor stimulus/context differences and sampling variability can attenuate single-study estimates. Importantly, the confidence intervals for Experiment 5 are broadly consistent with the pooled meta-analytic effects reported later, indicating that these nulls do not contradict the broader pattern.

Turning to the moderation tests, hierarchical regressions showed no evidence that general, death-specific, or overall norm endorsement moderated the effect of status on any outcome (all Status × Norm interactions nonsignificant; $\Delta R^2 \leq .016$). In other words, the (directionally positive) status effects were comparable across levels of norm endorsement.

Taken together, these results suggest that spontaneously endorsed norms are insufficient to account for the DPB in anonymous, decontextualized judgment settings. The null moderation, coupled with weak/unreliable status effects under correction, points to the importance of contextual activation: norm influence may be stronger in performative or reputationally salient contexts. Experiment 6 directly tests this by manipulating the accessibility and valence of social norms (norm-endorsing vs. norm-criticizing content) to determine whether making norms situationally salient restores or strengthens the DPB. Overall, because none of the Status × Norm Endorsement interactions were significant across outcomes—and the norm scale was administered within the same session after the mortality cue—these data do not permit causal claims that privately endorsed norms produce the DPB in this paradigm.

Experiment 6

In Experiment 5, I found no moderation of the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) by individual differences in social norm endorsement. This null effect suggested that stable, internalised beliefs about social propriety may not account for evaluative uplift toward the deceased in anonymous judgment contexts. In preregistered Experiment 6 (https://aspredicted.org/4qnj-vybs.pdf), I tested an alternative hypothesis: that posthumous favourability arises not from enduring dispositions but from *contextually activated* normative framing that shapes evaluative

expression in the moment. Specifically, I examined whether the DPB is moderated by exposure to explicitly framed social norms.

Participants read a short article that either endorsed (advocated respect for the dead) or criticised (challenged the necessity of deference) this convention before evaluating a target described as either dead or alive. I retained the evaluatively ambiguous vignette format from Experiments 2–5 and continued to measure trait impressions across the interpersonal domains of Sociability, Morality, and Competence.

I hypothesised that participants would again evaluate deceased targets more favourably than living ones, replicating the DPB. I further predicted that normative framing would moderate this effect. If the DPB is driven by situationally activated norms, it should be amplified in the norm-endorsing condition and reduced or eliminated in the norm-criticising condition. Conversely, if the DPB reflects a more deeply rooted psychological response to death, it should emerge regardless of the normative message.

Method

Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis (GPower; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that an *N* of 128 would suffice to detect a medium-sized main effect ($\eta^2 = .059$) with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$). I recruited 188 United Kingdom Prolific workers, who completed the survey on their home computer. I excluded 20 for failing the manipulation check, seven who correctly identified the experiment's purpose, four who responded "no" to an honesty item asking whether their data should be included in the analysis, and two who demonstrated non-engagement by leaving the same answer for every scale item. The final sample consisted of 155 participants, aged 18 to 82 years ($M = 41.41$, $SD = 15.72$). A sensitivity power analysis (GPower) indicated that, with $N = 155$, the study had 80% power to detect effects of $\eta^2 \geq .050$; smaller effects may have gone undetected. The design was a 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (norm: endorsed vs. criticised) between-subjects factorial. I randomly assigned participants to conditions (dead × endorsed $n = 42$; dead × criticised $n = 39$; alive × endorsed $n = 40$; alive × criticised $n = 34$). Although the Target × Norm interaction was specified a priori, it was expected to be small ($\eta^2 \approx .01$); with $N = 155$ the study was underpowered for such effects. Accordingly, interaction tests are interpreted cautiously, and their nulls are non-diagnostic; the sample was powered primarily for main effects.

Procedure and Materials

Participants responded to demographic questions about their age, gender, and ethnicity. Of the 155 participants, most identified as White ($n = 121$). Other reported ethnicities included: Black or Black British ($n = 15$), Mixed ($n = 9$), Asian or Asian British ($n = 7$), and Other (n

= 3). Next, participants were randomly assigned to read a short article, ostensibly from *Psychology Bulletin*, either endorsing or criticising the norm of respecting the dead. Subsequently, participants read a vignette describing either Sam or Alex, portrayed as either dead or alive. The vignette reproduced the same evaluatively ambiguous content used in Experiments 2–5.

Participants then evaluated (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) the target on warmth (M = 4.12, SD = 1.17, α = .80), competence (M = 6.01, SD = .75, α = .74), morality (M = 5.63, SD = .94, α = .83), respect (M = 5.03, SD = 1.17, α = .92), and liking (M = 4.67, SD = 1.17, α = .88). These traits correspond to the three interpersonal domains: Sociability (warmth, liking), Morality (morality, respect), and Competence (competence). The order of trait blocks was randomised for each participant, except for liking. I also derived a composite index (M = 5.09, SD = 0.83, α = .93), collapsing across all interpersonal domains. Afterward, participants then completed two manipulation checks: "The person in the description (is/was) a_____" (Man/Woman/Non-Binary/Don't Know) and "The person in the description (is/was)_____" (Alive/Dead/Don't Know). All 155 participants passed both checks.

Further, participants answered an open-ended question about the experiment's purpose. A total of 152 participants provided a response. Most (n = 59) referenced the target's (e.g., "dead," "alive"), whereas others (n = 30) mentioned impression formation (e.g., "forming an opinion," "judging personality"). A small number expressed uncertainty (n = 6) or mentioned honesty/truthfulness (n = 2). The remaining responses (n = 55) were vague or idiosyncratic. Crucially, no participants identified the two manipulated variables. Finally, participants completed a mood repair task. I provide the full research protocol in Appendix F.

Results

I analysed the data using a series of 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (norm: endorsed vs. criticised) ANOVAs. Bonferroni-corrected α = .0083 for six outcomes.

Manipulation Check

In the final sample, all participants responded to manipulation check items correctly: 81 correctly indicated the target was dead in the dead conditions, and 74 correctly indicated the target was alive in the alive condition.

Target Evaluation

Interpersonal Domains. Participants in the dead condition (M = 4.39, SD = 1.14) rated the target as warmer than those in the alive condition (M = 3.83, SD = 1.13), $F(1, 151) = 9.74$, p = .002, η^2 = .061. Warmth ratings did not significantly differ between the norm-endorsed (M =

4.11, *SD* = 1.09) and norm-criticised (*M* = 4.14, *SD* = 1.25) conditions, *F*(1, 151) < 0.001, *p* = .998, η^2 < .001. The interaction was not significant, *F*(1, 151) = 1.65, *p* = .201, η^2 = .011.

Participants in the dead condition (*M* = 4.91, *SD* = 1.02) rated the target as more likeable than those in the alive condition (*M* = 4.41, *SD* = 1.27), *F*(1, 151) = 8.03, *p* = .005, η^2 = .051. Liking did not significantly differ between the norm-endorsed (*M* = 4.66, *SD* = 1.08) and norm-criticised (*M* = 4.67, *SD* = 1.27) conditions, *F*(1, 151) = 0.01, *p* = .917, η^2 < .001. The interaction was trending, *F*(1, 151) = 3.63, *p* = .059, η^2 = .023, suggesting that the magnitude of the DPB on liking tended to be greater in the norm-criticised condition.

Participants in the dead condition (*M* = 6.13, *SD* = 0.67) showed a positive trend toward rating the target as more competent than those in the alive condition (*M* = 5.87, *SD* = 0.82), *F*(1, 151) = 4.49, *p* = .036, η^2 = .029, but this did not survive Bonferroni correction. Competence ratings did not significantly differ between the norm-endorsed (*M* = 6.06, *SD* = 0.80) and norm-criticised (*M* = 5.95, *SD* = 0.70) condition, *F*(1, 151) = 1.00, *p* = .319, η^2 = .007. Further, the interaction was not significant, *F*(1, 151) = 0.05, *p* = .823, η^2 < .001.

Participants in the dead condition (*M* = 5.70, *SD* = 0.89) did not rate the target as more moral than those in the alive condition (*M* = 5.55, *SD* = 1.00), *F*(1, 151) = 1.03, *p* = .311, η^2 = .007. Morality ratings did not significantly differ between the norm-endorsed (*M* = 5.66, *SD* = 0.90) and norm-criticised (*M* = 5.56, *SD* = 0.99) conditions, *F*(1, 151) = 0.27, *p* = .607, η^2 = .002. No interaction emerged, *F*(1, 151) = 0.73, *p* = .394, η^2 = .005.

Participants in the dead condition (*M* = 5.25, *SD* = 0.96) did not rate the target as more deserving of respect than those in the alive condition (*M* = 4.78, *SD* = 1.33), *F*(1, 151) = 6.68, *p* = .011, η^2 = .042. Respect ratings did not significantly differ between the norm-endorsed (*M* = 5.03, *SD* = 1.12) and norm-criticised (*M* = 5.02, *SD* = 1.23) conditions, *F*(1, 151) = 0.02, *p* = .876, η^2 < .001. The interaction was not significant, *F*(1, 151) = 0.61, *p* = .438, η^2 = .004.

Finally, overall (i.e., in terms of the composite), participants evaluated the target more favourably when the target was dead (*M* = 5.28, *SD* = 0.74) than alive (*M* = 4.89, *SD* = 0.89), *F*(1, 151) = 9.18, *p* = .003, η^2 = .057. Evaluations did not statistically differ between the norm-endorsed (*M* = 5.11, *SD* = 0.76) and norm-criticised (*M* = 5.07, *SD* = 0.91) conditions, *F*(1, 151) = 0.14, *p* = .706, η^2 = .001. No significant interaction emerged, *F*(1, 151) = 1.62, *p* = .205, η^2 = .011. For ease of comparison across outcomes, the corresponding condition means, standard deviations, and p values are summarised in Table 10.

Discussion

In Experiment 6, I tested whether the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) is moderated by explicit normative framing. Participants read a short text either endorsing or criticising the

social convention of speaking respectfully about the dead before evaluating a lay target described as alive or dead. I replicated the DPB across warmth and liking—component traits of the sociability domain—and on the composite measure. However, normative framing did not moderate these effects: the DPB was equally strong whether participants had read a defence or critique of the norm.

As in Experiment 5, normative content did not moderate the bias. Deceased targets were rated higher on warmth, liking, and the composite, with morality, respect, and competence not surviving correction. Two caveats qualify interpretation. First, the article manipulation was intentionally strong and may have induced reactance, which could blunt moderation or even invert liking trends. Second, I did not include a manipulation check for perceived norm endorsement, so I cannot confirm that the articles shifted normative beliefs as intended.

In contrast to a global halo (Thorndike, 1920), the DPB in Experiment 6 did not extend to competence. The effects were confined to sociability-linked judgements (warmth, liking) and the overall composite, consistent with the selective pattern observed in earlier studies of unfamiliar, lay targets. This selectivity suggests that competence remains comparatively resistant to posthumous elevation under the present framing. More broadly, the absence of moderation by norm framing may support the view that norms influence evaluative expression chiefly when communicative goals render norm adherence reputationally salient, a possibility examined further in Experiment 7. Overall, because the normative article (endorse vs. criticise) did not moderate status effects, no manipulation check verified uptake, and the manipulation itself may have induced reactance, these data do not support a causal interpretation that explicit norm activation produces the DPB; the bias persisted irrespective of normative framing.

Experiment 7

Across Experiments 2–6, I found consistent evidence for the Death Positivity Bias (DPB): participants evaluated deceased targets more favourably than living ones, particularly on traits linked to interpersonal regard such as liking, morality, and respect. However, the bias was not universal. In Experiment 1, no DPB emerged when the target was described in neutral terms, and across Experiments 2–6 the DPB did not extend to competence. Moreover, neither group membership nor exposure to norm-related manipulations moderated the effect. Taken together, these findings indicate that when expressed, the DPB is robust across targets and contexts but remains selective in scope.

In preregistered Experiment 7 (https://aspredicted.org/x6v8-vf5v.pdf), I re-examined the robustness of the DPB by testing whether it is shaped by *communication goals*, that is, whether

it is moderated by the social context in which evaluative judgements are produced. In previous experiments, participants formed private impressions of a target with no specified audience. Yet in everyday life, evaluations are often expressed publicly or for a known audience, activating motives that extend beyond accuracy, such as identity expression, social alignment, and impression management (Dillard, 1990; Higgins, 1992; Higgins et al., 1982).

Communicative adjustment is guided by the interplay between personal goals (e.g., appearing respectful, affiliative, or morally sensitive) and audience characteristics. These processes involve both motivational and cognitive regulation designed to align self-presentation with perceived situational demands (Higgins, 2000). In the present context, one such demand may be the social convention against speaking ill of the dead. If this norm is applied selectively depending on the audience, the DPB should be amplified when participants communicate with a favourable audience (who liked the target) and reduced or absent when addressing an unfavourable audience (who disliked the target).

I therefore formulated two competing hypotheses (Platt, 1964). If communication goals moderate the DPB, participants will evaluate deceased (versus living) targets more positively when addressing a favourable audience than an unfavourable one—manifesting as a *Target* × *Audience* interaction. This pattern would suggest that the DPB is not merely a spontaneous or automatic response to death, but a context-sensitive phenomenon guided by communicative goals. Alternatively, if the DPB is robust to audience context, evaluations of deceased targets should remain more positive than those of living targets regardless of audience valence, yielding a non-significant interaction.

I employed a factorial design that orthogonally manipulated target status (dead vs. alive) and audience valence (favourable vs. unfavourable). Participants were instructed to describe the same ambiguous target (Alex) to an audience who either liked or disliked him. I held all other elements constant, using identical vignette content, the same target name, and consistent male pronouns, given that in prior experiments (Experiments 4–6) I found no effects of name or gender.

Method

Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis using INTxPower (Sommet et al., 2023) indicated that a sample of 785 would suffice for detecting small main effects ($\eta^2 = .010$) and small two-way interactions ($\eta^2 \geq .010$) with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$). I recruited 756 United Kingdom Prolific workers, who completed the survey on their home computer. I excluded 27 who failed the manipulation check, six who responded “no” to an honesty item asking whether their data

should be included in the analysis, two who guessed the experiment's purpose, and two who demonstrated non-engagement by leaving the same response for every question. The final sample comprised 719 participants, aged 18 to 86 years (M = 42.11, SD = 14.12). This sample size provided 76.36% power to detect small effects (η^2 = .010). The design was a 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (audience: favourable vs. unfavourable) between-subjects factorial. I randomly assigned participants to conditions (dead × favourable n = 172; dead × unfavourable n = 179; alive × favourable n = 183; alive × unfavourable n = 185).

Procedure and Materials

First, participants answered demographic questions regarding age, gender, and ethnicity. Of the 719 participants, 718 provided a valid response. Most identified as White (n = 603). Other reported ethnicities included: Mixed (n = 45), Black or Black British (n = 40), Asian or Asian British (n = 25), and Other (n = 5). One participant did not report their ethnicity. Then, participants were then randomly assigned to conditions. They read a brief introductory prompt stating whether the target, Alex, had recently died or was alive, and indicating the audience's attitude toward the target. For example, participants in the dead/favourable audience condition read:

> *"On the next page, you'll read the description of another person, Alex (not his real name). We need to tell you in advance that Alex has recently passed away. You'll be asked to: (1) form an impression of Alex, (2) describe Alex to people who know and like him, and (3) rate Alex on various traits."*

Further, participants in the dead/unfavourable audience condition read:

> *On the next page, you'll read the description of another person, Alex (not his real name). We need to tell you in advance that Alex has recently passed away. You'll be asked to: (1) form an impression of Alex, (2) describe Alex to people who knew and disliked him, (3) rate Alex on various traits.*

Participants then read a vignette describing Alex in an ambiguous manner. It was modeled after the Sam vignette used in Experiments 2–4, matched for length and tone. The vignette referred to Alex as someone who did not need to rely on others and had few but intense social connections.

Next, participants completed an open-ended writing task in which they described Alex to an audience that either liked or disliked him. Next, they evaluated Alex (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) on warmth (M = 4.01, SD = 1.29, α = .85), competence (M = 5.85, SD = 0.92, α = .78), morality (M = 5.50, SD = 1.23, α = .91), respect (M = 4.80, SD = 1.40, α = .92), and liking (M = 4.63, SD = 1.45, α = .93), using three- or four-item scales as in Experiments 4–6. I proceeded

to derive a composite index (M = 4.96, SD = 1.06, α = .95), collapsing across all interpersonal domains. The order of trait blocks was randomised, except for liking, which was always presented last.

Afterward, participants responded to two manipulation checks: "The person in the description was a _____" (Man/Woman/Non-Binary/Don't Know) and "The person in the description was _____" (Alive/Dead/Don't Know). All 719 participants passed both checks. Subsequently, participants stated the purpose of the experiment. Most responses (n = 326) were vague or idiosyncratic, categorised as "other." Many participants (n = 221) interpreted the task as concerning general impression formation or evaluation. A smaller subset (n = 112) referred to audience-related elements, and 55 mentioned the target being either dead or alive. In all, the core hypothesis remained masked. Finally, participants completed a mood repair task. I provide the full research protocol in Appendix G.

Results

I analysed the data in a series of 2 (target: dead vs. alive) × 2 (audience: favourable vs. unfavourable) ANOVAs. Bonferroni-corrected α = .0083 for six outcomes.

Target Evaluation

Interpersonal Domains. Participants in the dead condition (M = 4.26, SD = 1.23) rated the target as warmer than those in the alive condition (M = 3.78, SD = 1.30), $F(1, 714) = 28.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .038$. Warmth ratings were also higher in the favourable (M = 4.37, SD = 1.26) than unfavourable (M = 3.67, SD = 1.22) audience condition, $F(1, 714) = 61.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .080$. The interaction was trending but not significant, $F(1, 714) = 4.44$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2 = .006$. Participants in the dead condition (M = 4.72, SD = 1.09) were rated as warmer than those in the alive condition (M = 4.04, SD = 1.32) when the audience was favourable, $t(353) = 5.24$, $p < .001$. However, this difference was smaller (dead M = 3.52, SD = 1.24; alive M = 3.81, SD = 1.19) when the audience was unfavourable, $t(361) = 2.29$, $p = .022$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 4.98, SD = 1.29) rated the target as more likeable than those in the alive condition (M = 4.30, SD = 1.52), $F(1, 715) = 45.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .060$. Liking ratings were also higher in the favourable (M = 4.95, SD = 1.41) than unfavourable (M = 4.33, SD = 1.42) audience condition, $F(1, 715) = 37.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .050$. The interaction was trending, $F(1, 715) = 3.61$, $p = .058$, $\eta^2 = .005$. Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.40, SD = 1.11) were rated as more likeable than those in the alive condition (M = 4.52, SD = 1.53) when the audience was favourable, $t(353) = 6.21$, $p < .001$. When the audience was unfavourable, this difference was smaller but still significant (alive M = 4.58, SD = 1.32; dead M = 4.08, SD = 1.48), $t(362) = 3.38$, $p < .001$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.93, SD = 0.87) did not rate the target as more competent than those in the alive condition (M = 5.77, SD = 0.95), $F(1, 715) = 6.22$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .009$. Competence ratings were higher in the favourable (M = 6.03, SD = 0.81) than unfavourable (M = 5.67, SD = 0.98) audience condition, $F(1, 715) = 31.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .042$. The interaction was trending but not significant, $F(1, 715) = 3.89$, $p = .049$, $\eta^2 = .005$. Participants in the dead condition (M = 6.19, SD = 0.68) rated the target as more competent than those in the alive condition (M = 5.89, SD = 0.88) when the audience was favourable, $t(353) = 3.53$, $p < .001$. However, when the audience was unfavourable, this difference was negligible (alive M = 5.68, SD = 0.95; dead M = 5.65, SD = 1.00), $t(362) = 0.34$, $p = .735$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.74, SD = 1.09) rated the target as more moral than those in the alive condition (M = 5.27, SD = 1.31), $F(1, 715) = 28.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .039$. In addition, morality ratings were higher when the audience was favourable (M = 5.76, SD = 1.14) than unfavourable (M = 5.24, SD = 1.26) to the target, $F(1, 715) = 35.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .047$. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 715) = 2.00$, $p = .158$, $\eta^2 = .003$.

Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.22, SD = 1.20) rated the target as more deserving of respect than those in the alive condition (M = 4.40, SD = 1.46), $F(1, 713) = 72.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .092$. Moreover, respect ratings were higher when the audience was favourable (M = 5.11, SD = 1.32) as opposed to unfavourable (M = 4.51, SD = 1.41) to the target, $F(1, 713) = 39.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .053$. The interaction was trending but not significant, $F(1, 713) = 6.36$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .009$. Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.66, SD = 0.95) rated the target as more deserving of respect than those in the alive condition (M = 4.59, SD = 1.41) when the audience was favourable, $t(352) = 8.32$, $p < .001$. A similar but weaker effect was observed in the unfavourable audience condition (alive M = 4.80, SD = 1.26; dead M = 4.22, SD = 1.49), $t(361) = 4.02$, $p < .001$.

Finally, overall, participants in the dead condition (M = 5.23, SD = 0.94) evaluated the target more positively than those in the alive condition (M = 4.71, SD = 1.11), $F(1, 715) = 51.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .067$. Participants also evaluated the target more positively in the favourable (M = 5.24, SD = 1.00) than unfavourable (M = 4.68, SD = 1.05) audience condition, $F(1, 715) = 59.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .077$. These effects were not qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1, 715) = 5.73$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2 = .008$. Participants in the dead condition (M = 5.61, SD = 0.77) evaluated the target more positively than those in the alive condition (M = 4.90, SD = 1.07) when the audience was favourable, $t(353) = 7.07$, $p < .001$. This effect was similar but weaker in the unfavourable audience condition (dead M = 4.86, SD = 0.95; alive M = 4.51, SD = 1.11), $t(362) = 3.24$, $p = .001$.

Simple slopes of audience (favourable vs. unfavourable) within each status (alive vs. dead) supported a social-information account. For dead targets, favourable audiences elicited higher composite evaluations than unfavourable audiences (M = 5.61, SD = 0.77 vs. M = 4.86, SD = 0.95), η^2 = .159, p < .001. For alive targets, the same pattern held (M = 4.90, SD = 1.07 vs. M = 4.51, SD = 1.11), η^2 = .031, p < .001.

Discussion

In Experiment 7, I tested whether the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) is moderated by communication goals. Participants evaluated a lay target described as either deceased or alive, with the understanding that their responses would be shared with an audience portrayed as favourable or unfavourable. This design introduced an explicit communicative context for evaluation. Audience main effects were strong, but the Status × Audience interaction did not survive familywise error control.

The DPB emerged robustly in the Sociability and Morality domains: deceased targets were judged warmer and more likeable, more moral, and more deserving of respect than living targets. Participants also evaluated deceased targets more positively on the composite. By contrast, the competence effect was small and directionally positive but did not survive Bonferroni correction (p = .013). For ease of comparison across outcomes, the corresponding condition means, standard deviations, and p values are summarised in Table 11.

Audience framing likely conveyed social information about the target (that he was liked or disliked), as evidenced by significant audience slopes within both dead and alive conditions. Accordingly, I cannot attribute differences to norm activation per se. In addition, this was the only study to include a writing task, which plausibly increased elaboration, self-presentation, and memorial framing. Such generative processing may amplify sociomoral uplift for deceased targets beyond what brief ratings alone produce.

These findings help to contextualise Experiments 5 and 6. Measuring or passively priming norms did not alter the DPB, and here an explicit audience cue did not yield confirmatory moderation either. Taken together, the results suggest that while the DPB is robust for Sociability and Morality (and sometimes extends to Competence), its sensitivity to audience cues may be subtle and contingent. Consistent with our broader programme, competence effects may require greater communicative salience or additional statistical power to emerge reliably, especially for unfamiliar, lay targets.

In sum, Experiment 7 provides a strong, high-powered replication of the DPB across core domains within a communicative setting, without definitive evidence of moderation by audience valence. The pattern supports a view of the DPB as a context-sensitive yet

predominantly sociomoral uplift, with competence showing only tentative movement here. The next section synthesises Experiments 2–7 meta-analytically to assess reliability, domain selectivity, and boundary conditions across the full programme. Overall, because audience valence simultaneously conveyed social information about the target (liked vs. disliked) and the Status × Audience interaction did not survive familywise error control, these data cannot be taken as causal evidence that communicative goals generate the DPB; rather, the bias persisted under audience framing.

Meta-Analyses

Overview and Rationale

In this chapter, I reported seven experiments testing the Death Positivity Bias (DPB). Experiment 1, which employed a neutral vignette and flat biographical detail, yielded null effects across all dependent measures. This led to a methodological shift beginning in Experiment 2, wherein all subsequent experiments used evaluatively ambiguous vignettes. These vignettes afforded participants greater interpretive latitude and—arguably—more closely mirrored the kinds of informational ambiguity that shape impression formation in naturalistic settings. In this meta-analysis, I synthesise findings from Experiments 2–7, all of which shared this ambiguity-based design feature, and I now report cross-study pooled effect sizes from random-effects models to estimate the strength and selectivity of the DPB. Random-effects pooling treats the true effect as varying across studies due to systematic differences in context (e.g., norm framing, audience goals, group membership), yielding an estimate of the mean effect in a distribution of plausible study contexts. This approach complements the programme's internal homogeneity by permitting generalisation beyond any single experimental instantiation.

The objective of the meta-analysis is to determine whether the DPB emerges consistently across experiments, and if so, in which interpersonal domains it is most reliably expressed. I analysed effects at three levels. First, I reported bias-corrected standardised mean differences (Hedges' g) for each dependent measure—warmth, competence, morality, respect, and liking—across experiments. I used Hedges' *g* rather than Cohen's d because *g* applies a small-sample bias correction (converging on *d* as *n* grows) and is the conventional metric for meta-analytic synthesis, improving comparability and reducing upward bias in pooled estimates (Hedges, 1981; Hedges & Olkin, 1985; Borenstein et al., 2009).

Second, I organised these measures according to the interpersonal domains of Sociability, Morality, and Competence. I operationalised Sociability as the average of warmth and liking from Experiment 4 onward; in Experiments 2 and 3, it was represented by liking alone,

as warmth had not yet been introduced. I calculated Morality as the mean of morality and respect, reflecting both internalised character and outward-facing social deference. By contrast, I represented Competence by a single dedicated scale, comprising multiple items (e.g., "competent," "effective at their job," "intelligent") across all experiments. This decision reflects both conceptual clarity and empirical sufficiency: Competence is a theoretically distinct domain within the interpersonal domains framework, separable from warmth and morality in content and function. Moreover, reliability analyses consistently showed acceptable internal consistency for the competence items used ($\alpha \geq .74$), and factor analyses in related research indicate that competence-relevant adjectives (e.g., intelligence, efficacy) load onto a unified latent factor (Brambilla et al., 2011; Wojciszke et al., 1998). Thus, a composite was unnecessary, as the construct was already psychometrically and conceptually coherent within a single scale. Finally, I examine the overall appraisal index which reflects participants' global impression of the target.

By integrating results at the trait, domain, and overall composite levels—and by adding pooled estimates across experiments—this meta-analysis provides a fine-grained and statistically precise assessment of the DPB. It consolidates findings from a unified programme of research, clarifies whether the DPB reflects a broad evaluative uplift versus a selective effect concentrated in particular interpersonal domains, and quantifies the magnitude of these effects.

Meta-Analytic Strategy

To synthesise results across Experiments 2–7, I first computed Hedges' *g* within each study for each trait and composite (positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets). I then fit random-effects models to obtain pooled ("Overall") effects at the trait, domain, and composite levels, using inverse-variance weighting that incorporates both within-study sampling error and between-study variance. Under this model, the pooled *g* is interpreted as the mean of a distribution of true effects generated by conceptually similar but non-identical implementations of the DPB paradigm.

Levels of Analysis

At the first level, I examined the effect of target on each dependent measure—warmth, liking, competence, morality, and respect—across experiments. These analyses provide trait-specific estimates of the DPB.

At the second level, I grouped dependent variables into broader interpersonal domains. I operationalised Morality as the mean of morality and respect ratings. I analysed competence using the competence scale alone. I calculated Sociability as the average of liking and warmth,

beginning in Experiment 4 when warmth was introduced. In Experiments 2 and 3, I represented Sociability by liking alone. Although this introduces a shift in operationalisation, the inclusion of earlier experiments provides a fuller picture of how the DPB unfolds across social-evaluative constructs.

At the third level, I examined the overall appraisal index. This unweighted composite of all five dependent variables serves as an overall indicator of the target's perceived social value.

Effect Size Computation

Composite scores were formed by averaging the relevant traits within experiments before estimating the within-study *g*; I did not adjust for intercorrelations among component traits, as the goal was to capture overall evaluative tendencies within each interpersonal domain. Random-effects pooling was then applied to these study-level *g*s, so the reported "Overall" values (e.g., Sociability, Morality, Competence, and the global composite) reflect the mean effect across potentially heterogeneous study contexts.

Trait Interdependence

Although some dependent measures were empirically correlated, I did not adjust for intercorrelations when forming composites. The objective was to estimate the overall evaluative tendency associated with each interpersonal domain, not to partition orthogonal variance components.[2] This approach prioritises conceptual coherence over statistical independence. I reported reliability estimates (Cronbach's alphas) in the respective experiments and do not reproduce them here. Consistent with this rationale, preliminary zero-order correlations and the subsequent CFAs indicated correlated but empirically separable traits and domains, supporting the use of conceptually coherent composites rather than orthogonalised scores. Multivariate meta-analysis could, in principle, model cross-outcome covariance more explicitly; I note this as a limitation and direction for future work.

Interpretive Goals

This synthesis tests whether the DPB generalises across traits and interpersonal domains, and whether it is best understood as a trait-specific phenomenon versus a domain-general uplift. By integrating results from multiple experiments that employed a similar design, the analysis enables stronger conclusions about the scope, selectivity, and psychological basis of the DPB. Before proceeding to these results, I validated the measurement structure

[2] I did not adjust for intercorrelations among traits when forming domain composites. I intended to capture each interpersonal domain's overall evaluative profile, not to partial out shared variance. Although orthogonalisation techniques (e.g., residualisation or factor rotation) can be useful when isolating unique predictors, they are inappropriate here, where conceptual overlap between variables (e.g., morality and respect) is theoretically meaningful and central to domains.

underlying the interpersonal domains to ensure that domain-level composites reflected empirically supported latent distinctions rather than assumed categories.

Preliminary Trait Correlations

To characterise empirical associations among the dependent variables before fitting the confirmatory factor models, I computed zero-order Pearson correlations among participants' mean scores on all trait measures within each experiment, collapsed across target conditions. Across experiments, traits within the same interpersonal domain were strongly correlated (e.g., morality – respect, warmth – liking), and cross-domain correlations were moderate, indicating related but empirically separable constructs. These patterns provided initial support for the hypothesised three-domain structure of interpersonal evaluation.

Table 12

Zero-order correlations among trait ratings in Experiments 2 and 3 (without Warmth)

Variable Pair	Experiment 2 *r*	Experiment 3 *r*	Mean *r*
Within-domain (Morality)			
Morality – Respect	.61 **	.64 **	.63
Cross-domain (Sociability–Morality)			
Liking – Morality	.42 **	.59 **	.51
Liking – Respect	.65 **	.77 **	.71
Cross-domain (Competence–Others)			
Competence – Morality	.53 **	.58 **	.56
Competence – Respect	.46 **	.57 **	.52
Competence – Liking	.34 **	.50 **	.42

Note. Pearson correlations computed on participant-level mean scores. All *p*s < .001 (two-tailed). Average within-domain correlation = .63; average cross-domain correlation = .54.

Table 13

Zero-order correlations among trait ratings in Experiments 4–7 (with Warmth)

Variable Pair	Exp 4 *r*	Exp 5 *r*	Exp 6 *r*	Exp 7 *r*	Mean *r*
Within-domain (Sociability)					
Warmth – Liking	.69 **	.63 **	.70 **	.75 **	.69
Within-domain (Morality)					

Variable Pair	Exp 4 *r*	Exp 5 *r*	Exp 6 *r*	Exp 7 *r*	Mean *r*
Morality – Respect	.42 **	.53 **	.66 **	.71 **	.58
Cross-domain (Sociability–Morality)					
Warmth – Morality	.51 **	.42 **	.40 **	.51 **	.46
Liking – Morality	.37 **	.54 **	.58 **	.67 **	.54
Warmth – Respect	.68 **	.63 **	.58 **	.68 **	.64
Liking – Respect	.83 **	.81 **	.76 **	.85 **	.81
Cross-domain (Competence–Others)					
Competence – Warmth	.30 **	.21 *	.33 **	.39 **	.31
Competence – Liking	.17 *	.47 **	.38 **	.51 **	.38
Competence – Morality	.47 **	.51 **	.36 **	.54 **	.47
Competence – Respect	.24 **	.46 **	.48 **	.58 **	.44

Note. Pearson correlations computed on participant-level mean scores, collapsed across conditions. $p < .01$ (two-tailed) unless marked * ($p < .05$). Average within-domain correlations: Sociability = .69; Morality = .58. Average cross-domain correlations = .51.

Across all six datasets, correlations were consistently positive and moderate-to-strong. Traits that shared conceptual domains—such as Warmth and Liking (Sociability) or Morality and Respect (Morality)—showed the highest associations (rs ≈ .60–.75), while cross-domain relations involving Competence were weaker (rs ≈ .30–.50). These results indicate that participants' evaluations of others were structured around three interrelated but distinct interpersonal domains, corroborating the theoretical framework and motivating the subsequent confirmatory factor analyses.

Validation of the Three-Domain Measurement Model

Before conducting the meta-analytic models, I tested whether the proposed three-domain structure of interpersonal evaluation—Sociability, Morality, and Competence—adequately represented the item-level data collected across experiments. This step ensured that domain-level aggregation was grounded in empirically validated latent relationships rather than assumed conceptual distinctions. I conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using maximum-likelihood estimation in SPSS AMOS to compare alternative structural representations of the data. Each model fixed one loading per latent to 1 to define the factor scale, freely estimated all remaining parameters, specified unique error variances for each indicator, and allowed latent domains to correlate. No estimation warnings, negative variances,

or non-positive definite covariance matrices were observed, confirming statistical identification throughout.

Experiments 2–3

I first examined the factor structure using pooled item-level data from Experiments 2 and 3 (N = 502), which included measures of Liking, Morality, Respect, and Competence (but not Warmth). Three theoretically grounded models were compared: (a) a three-domain model distinguishing Sociability (Liking), Morality (Morality and Respect), and Competence; (b) a two-domain model collapsing Sociability and Morality into a single Sociomoral factor alongside Competence; and (c) a single-domain model in which all items loaded onto a global evaluative dimension. The Sociomoral specification in the two-domain model reflects convergent theoretical and empirical evidence that warmth- and morality-related judgements form the evaluative core of person perception (Brambilla et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2007). Both capture perceived intent—how individuals mean to behave toward others—whereas Competence reflects perceived ability to enact those intentions. This pairing was also supported by the consistent pattern of high observed covariance between Sociability- and Morality-related indicators across studies, suggesting potential redundancy at the latent level. Accordingly, the two-domain model provided a targeted test of whether these conceptually related evaluations were empirically separable or best represented as a single higher-order dimension.

Table 14

Model fit comparisons for confirmatory factor analyses of Experiments 2–3 (without Warmth dimension)

Model	χ^2 (df)	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	AIC	ΔCFI vs. 3-domain	Interpretation
Three domains	581.09 (62)	.876	.818	.129	665.09	—	Baseline model
Two domains (Sociomoral + Competence)	789.09 (64)	.827	.754	.150	869.09	−.049	Worse fit
Single domain (Global Evaluation)	1038.15 (65)	.768	.675	.173	1116.15	−.108	Substantially worse fit

Three-Domain Model. The three-domain model converged normally, $\chi^2(62) = 581.09$, $p < .001$. All standardised loadings were moderate to strong (>.60), indicating coherent measurement within each domain. Overall fit was moderate (*CFI* = .88, *TLI* = .82, *RMSEA* = .13 [90% CI .12, .14], *AIC* = 665.09). Although χ^2 was significant, as expected with this sample size,

the pattern of indices suggested an interpretable, internally consistent structure. Inter-factor correlations were positive and moderate-to-high (*rs* = .56–.87), implying related but separable domains. Although domain correlations were substantial, they did not approach unity, supporting discriminant validity among the latent constructs. The model was statistically overidentified (df = 62) and yielded no inadmissible solutions.

Two-Domain Model. The two-domain Sociomoral + Competence model also converged without error but demonstrated weaker fit: $\chi^2(64) = 789.09$, $p < .001$, *CFI* = .83, *TLI* = .75, *RMSEA* = .15 (90% CI .14, .16), *AIC* = 869.09. Standardised loadings remained acceptable, but residual correlations increased and the Δ*CFI* = –.05 relative to the three-domain model indicated a meaningful loss of explanatory precision. Despite the high association between Sociability and Morality, their combination reduced model adequacy, suggesting they remain empirically distinguishable.

Single-Domain Model. A single global factor model was statistically identified (*df* = 65) and converged normally but fit the data poorly: $\chi^2(65) = 1038.15$, $p < .001$, *CFI* = .77, *TLI* = .68, *RMSEA* = .17 (90% CI .16, .18), *AIC* = 1116.15. Although individual loadings were sizeable, the model failed to reproduce observed covariances, resulting in large residuals and a substantial deterioration in comparative fit (Δ*CFI* = –.11).

Comparative Model Evaluation. Across all specifications, the three-domain model provided the best and most interpretable representation of the data (*CFI* = .88, *RMSEA* = .13), outperforming both the two-domain (*CFI* = .83, *RMSEA* = .15) and single-domain (*CFI* = .77, *RMSEA* = .17) alternatives. The decline in fit indices for simpler models exceeded accepted thresholds (Δ*CFI* > .01, Δ*RMSEA* > .015; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), indicating that distinguishing among Sociability, Morality, and Competence added meaningful explanatory value.

Absolute fit was moderate across all specifications—unsurprising given the heterogeneity of measures (pooled across two experiments using distinct vignettes and samples), the limited number of indicators per domain, the modest total item pool, and the relatively large sample size (*N* = 502). These factors typically attenuate absolute fit indices by introducing between-study variance and limiting parameter redundancy. Nevertheless, because such constraints applied equally across all tested models, relative comparisons remain valid. In pooled behavioural datasets, minor departures from local independence and cross-domain covariance often inflate global misfit statistics (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Accordingly, relative rather than absolute fit was prioritised. The three-domain model

consistently outperformed simpler alternatives across all indices, representing the most parsimonious and theoretically coherent account of the data.

These findings suggest that the same latent evaluative structure observed in later studies is already detectable in the earlier datasets, establishing a consistent measurement foundation for subsequent domain-level and meta-analytic analyses.

Experiments 4–7

To confirm the generality of this structure across the later experiments, I next conducted CFAs on the pooled item-level data from Experiments 4–7 (N = 1,183). These studies included both the Liking and Warmth items within the Sociability domain, allowing for a more comprehensive assessment of the hypothesised three-domain configuration. Three competing models were again tested: (a) a three-domain model specifying Sociability (Warmth, Liking), Morality (Morality, Respect), and Competence as correlated latent domains; (b) a two-domain model combining Sociability and Morality into a single Sociomoral factor alongside Competence; and (c) a single-domain model representing a global evaluative dimension. All models were estimated in AMOS using maximum-likelihood estimation, with one loading per latent fixed to 1 and all other parameters freely estimated. Each model specified unique error variances for all indicators and allowed inter-factor correlations. No estimation warnings, negative variances, or nonpositive definite covariance matrices were observed, confirming statistical identification.

Table 15

Model fit comparisons for confirmatory factor analyses of Experiments 4–7 (with Warmth dimension)

Model	χ^2 (df)	*CFI*	*TLI*	*RMSEA*	*AIC*	Δ*CFI* vs. 3-domain	Interpretation
Three domains	2158.55 (101)	.862	.815	.131	2260.55	—	Baseline model
Two domains (Sociomoral + Competence)	2648.43 (103)	.830	.775	.145	2746.43	−.032	Worse fit
Single domain (Global Evaluation)	3271.32 (104)	.788	.723	.161	3367.32	−.074	Substantially worse fit

Three-Domain Model. The three-domain model converged normally, $\chi^2(101)$ = 2,158.55, $p < .001$. All standardised loadings were moderate to high (.61–.90), indicating coherent measurement within each domain. Fit indices again reflected moderate fit: *CFI* = .86,

TLI = .82, *RMSEA* = .13 (90% CI [.12, .14]), *AIC* = 2,260.55. As in the earlier analysis, the χ^2 statistic was significant, a predictable outcome given the large sample size, but the pattern of relative indices and strong loadings supported an interpretable and consistent structure. Inter-factor correlations were high between Sociability and Morality (*r* = .91) and moderate between both and Competence (*rs* = .56–.67), implying conceptual relatedness but empirical distinctiveness. The model was statistically overidentified (*df* = 101) and produced no inadmissible estimates.

Two-Domain Model. The two-domain Sociomoral + Competence model was also statistically identified (*df* = 103; overidentified) and converged normally, but provided weaker fit: $\chi^2(103) = 2{,}648.43$, $p < .001$, *CFI* = .83, *TLI* = .78, *RMSEA* = .15 (90% CI [.14, .15]), *AIC* = 2,746.43. Although individual loadings remained high, residual correlations increased, and overall explanatory power declined relative to the three-domain baseline. The fit deterioration ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 489.88$, $\Delta CFI = -.03$, $\Delta RMSEA = +.01$) indicated that merging Sociability and Morality obscured meaningful variance otherwise captured by their distinction.

Single-Domain Model. The single-domain global evaluative model, in which all items loaded onto one latent factor, also converged normally (*df* = 104; overidentified) but exhibited the poorest fit: $\chi^2(104) = 3{,}271.32$, $p < .001$, *CFI* = .79, *TLI* = .72, *RMSEA* = .16 (90% CI [.16, .17]), *AIC* = 3,367.32. Despite generally strong loadings (> .60), the model failed to capture the covariance structure among indicators, resulting in inflated residuals and markedly reduced comparative fit indices ($\Delta CFI = -.07$, $\Delta RMSEA = +.03$ relative to the three-domain model). Accordingly, a single latent factor could not adequately reproduce the observed covariance structure among domains.

Comparative Model Evaluation. Across all specifications, the three-domain model provided the best and most theoretically coherent representation of the data (*CFI* = .86, *RMSEA* = .13), outperforming both the two-domain (*CFI* = .83, *RMSEA* = .15) and single-domain (*CFI* = .79, *RMSEA* = .16) alternatives. The decline in fit indices for simpler models exceeded conventional thresholds ($\Delta CFI > .01$, $\Delta RMSEA > .015$; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), confirming that distinguishing between Sociability, Morality, and Competence captured meaningful structure in evaluative judgements.

Absolute model fit was moderate, a pattern expected given the heterogeneity of measures, the broad sampling of participants, and the size of the pooled dataset (*N* = 1,183). In large, multi-study samples, χ^2 and *RMSEA* values are highly sensitive to small specification errors, while correlated content across evaluative traits often inflates model misfit (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For this reason, model adequacy was evaluated based on relative rather than

absolute fit. The three-domain model consistently demonstrated superior fit across all indices, validating the framework used for subsequent trait-, domain-, and composite-level meta-analytic analyses.

Integrative Summary

Together, these analyses confirmed that the three-domain structure of interpersonal evaluation—Sociability, Morality, and Competence—provides the most defensible representation of the covariance among trait measures across all datasets. Although absolute fit indices were moderate, this pattern aligns with expectations for heterogeneous, pooled data and reflects the sensitivity of χ^2 and *RMSEA* to minor specification error in large samples. Importantly, the relative superiority of the three-domain model over simpler two- and single-domain alternatives remained stable across both datasets, despite differences in sample size, stimuli, and item composition. The inclusion of Warmth indicators in Experiments 4–7 modestly improved the internal coherence of the Sociability domain without altering the overall structural pattern, demonstrating that the domain framework is robust to broader measurement coverage. This consistency indicates that Sociability, Morality, and Competence capture reliable and interpretable dimensions of evaluative judgement that generalise across varying measurement conditions. On this empirical foundation, I conducted the subsequent meta-analytic models using domain-level composites derived from the validated three-domain structure.

Trait-Level Meta-Analytic Results

To examine the consistency and scope of the DPB across traits, I computed standardised mean differences (Hedges' g) between deceased and living target conditions for each dependent measure separately within Experiments 2 through 7. Positive effect sizes indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased individuals. In Table 16, I present these results. I depict forest plots for each trait in Figures 1–5. Across traits, all pooled meta-analytic effects were statistically significant at $p < .001$, indicating that, when data were aggregated across experiments, deceased targets were evaluated more favourably on every trait dimension. The following sections describe these effects at the experiment level, highlighting where individual results remained significant after applying Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons.

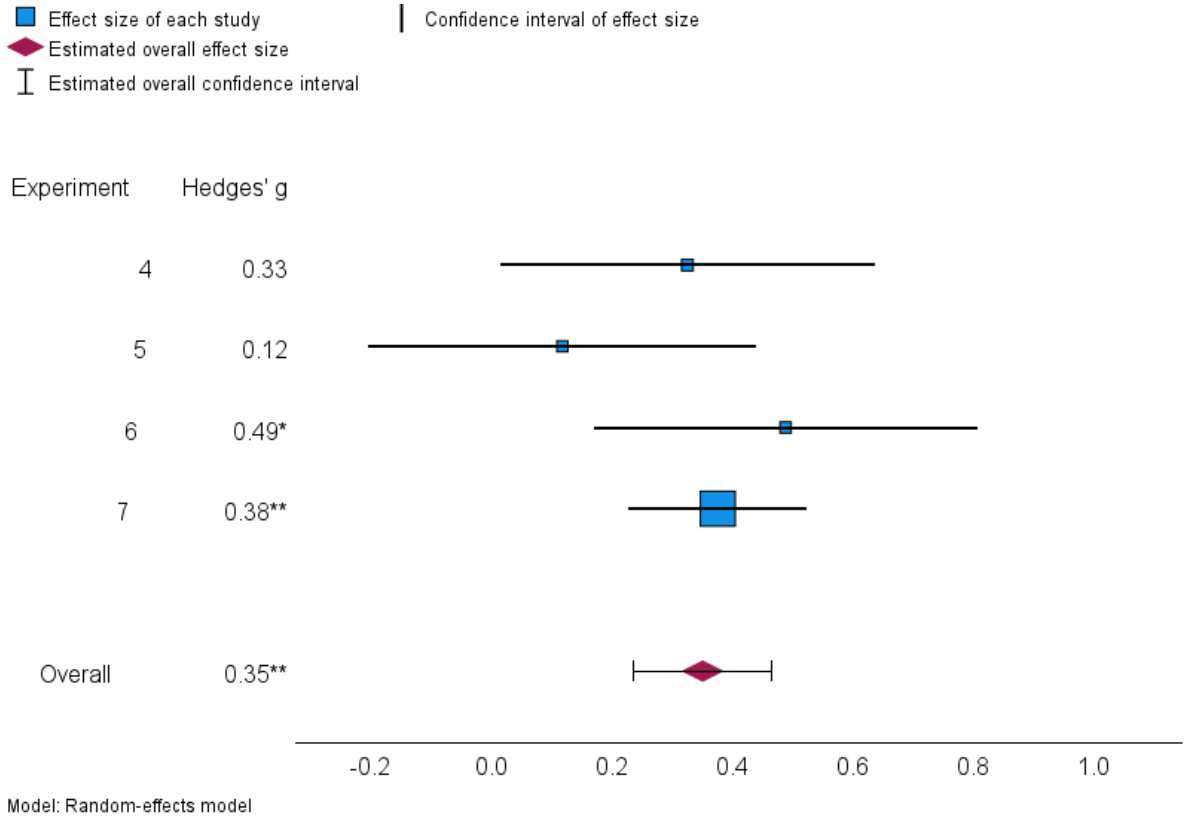
Warmth

The DPB consistently emerged for warmth across all relevant experiments (Experiments 4–7). After applying Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons, the effect remained statistically significant in Experiments 6 and 7, with smaller, non-significant effects in Experiments 4 and 5.

Effect sizes ranged from $g = 0.12$ (Experiment 5) to $g = 0.49$ (Experiment 6). These results suggest that death enhances perceptions of friendliness, tolerance, and emotional warmth—core traits within the Sociability domain.

Figure 1

Forest Plot of Hedges' g Values for Warmth Across Experiments 4–7



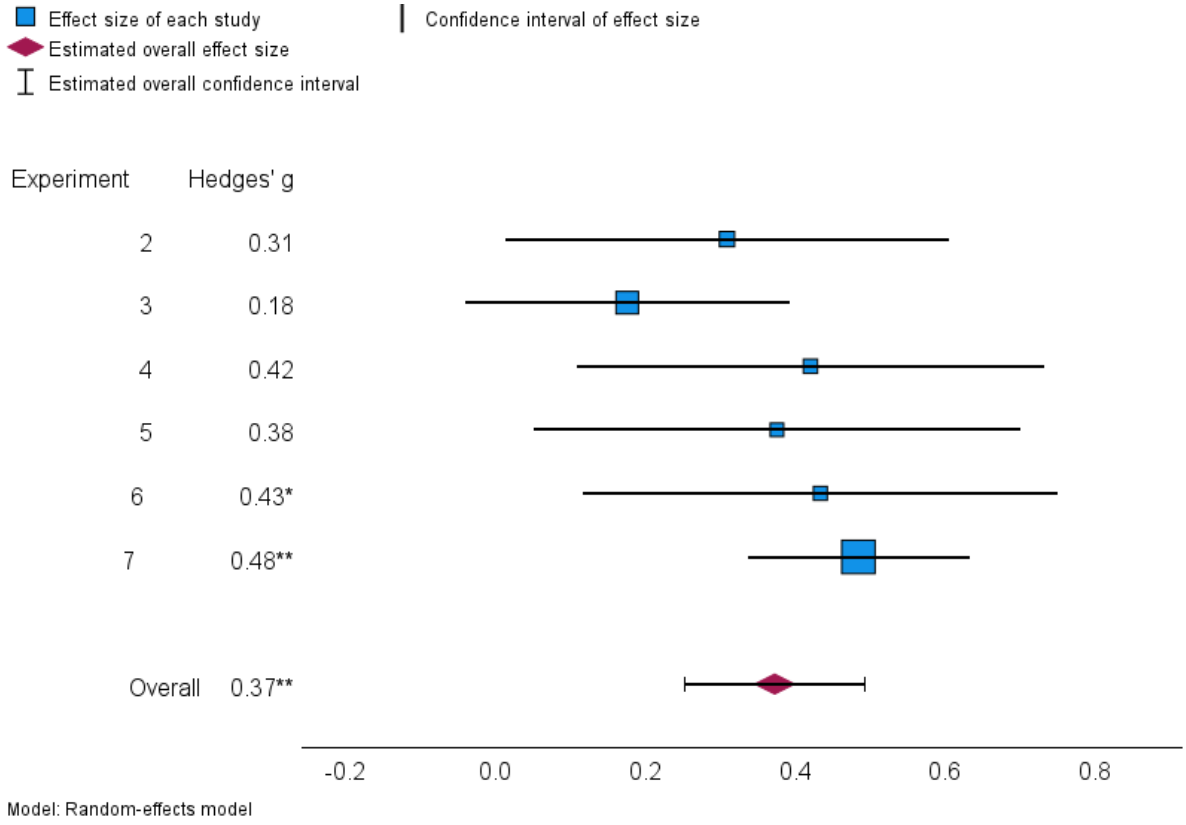
Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .0083, Bonferroni over 6 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Liking

Liking was assessed in all six experiments and showed a generally positive pattern: all effects favoured deceased over living targets. After applying Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons, the effect remained statistically significant in Experiments 6, and 7, with smaller, non-significant effects in studies 2, 3, 4, and 5. Effect sizes ranged from $g = 0.18$ (Experiment 3) to $g = 0.48$ (Experiment 7). These findings suggest that broader favourability judgements, reflecting global interpersonal attraction, tend to increase when the target is deceased.

Figure 2

Forest Plot of Hedges' g Values for Liking Across Experiments 2–7



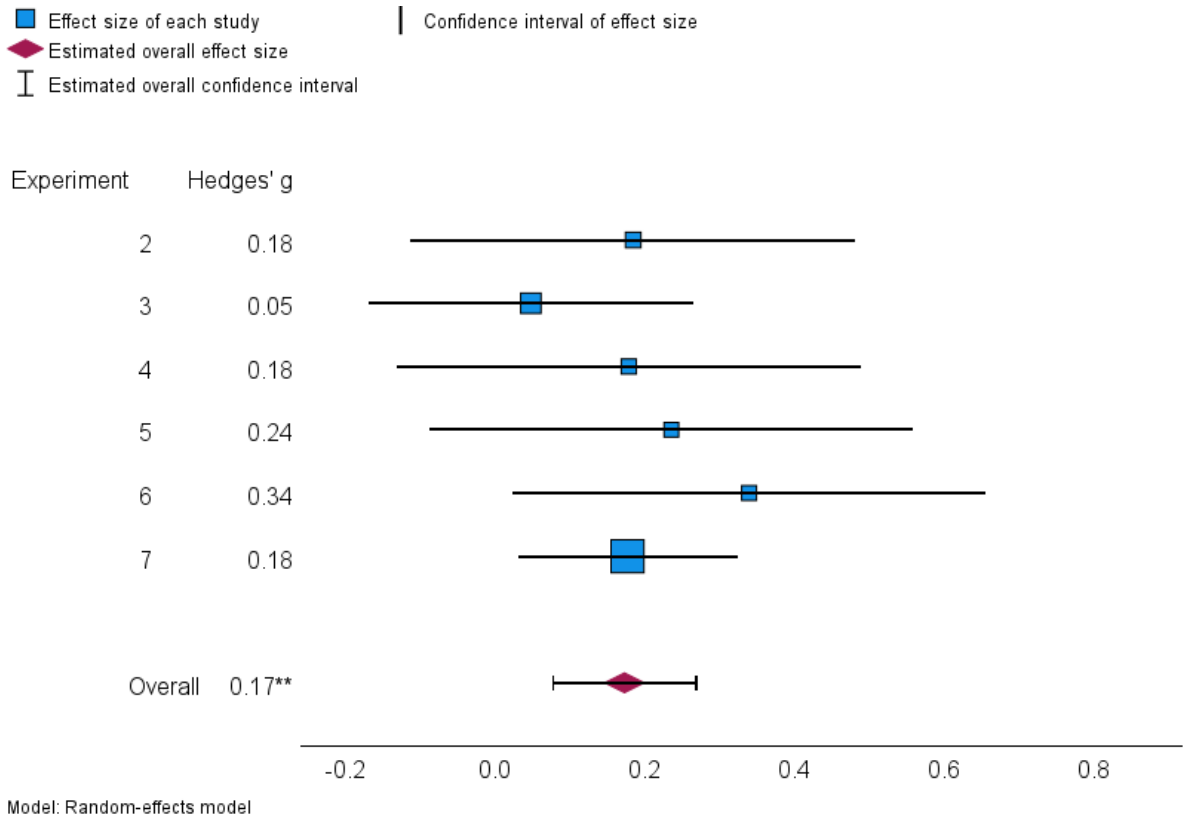
Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .0083, Bonferroni over 6 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Competence

Effects for competence were small and inconsistent, and none reached statistical significance after correcting for multiple comparisons. Effect sizes ranged from g = 0.05 (Experiment 3) to g = 0.34 (Experiment 6). These results suggest that competence is less susceptible than warmth or morality to posthumous elevation, though small effects may still arise under conditions of greater evaluative accessibility or statistical power.

Figure 3

Forest Plot of Hedges' g Values for Competence Across Experiments 2–7



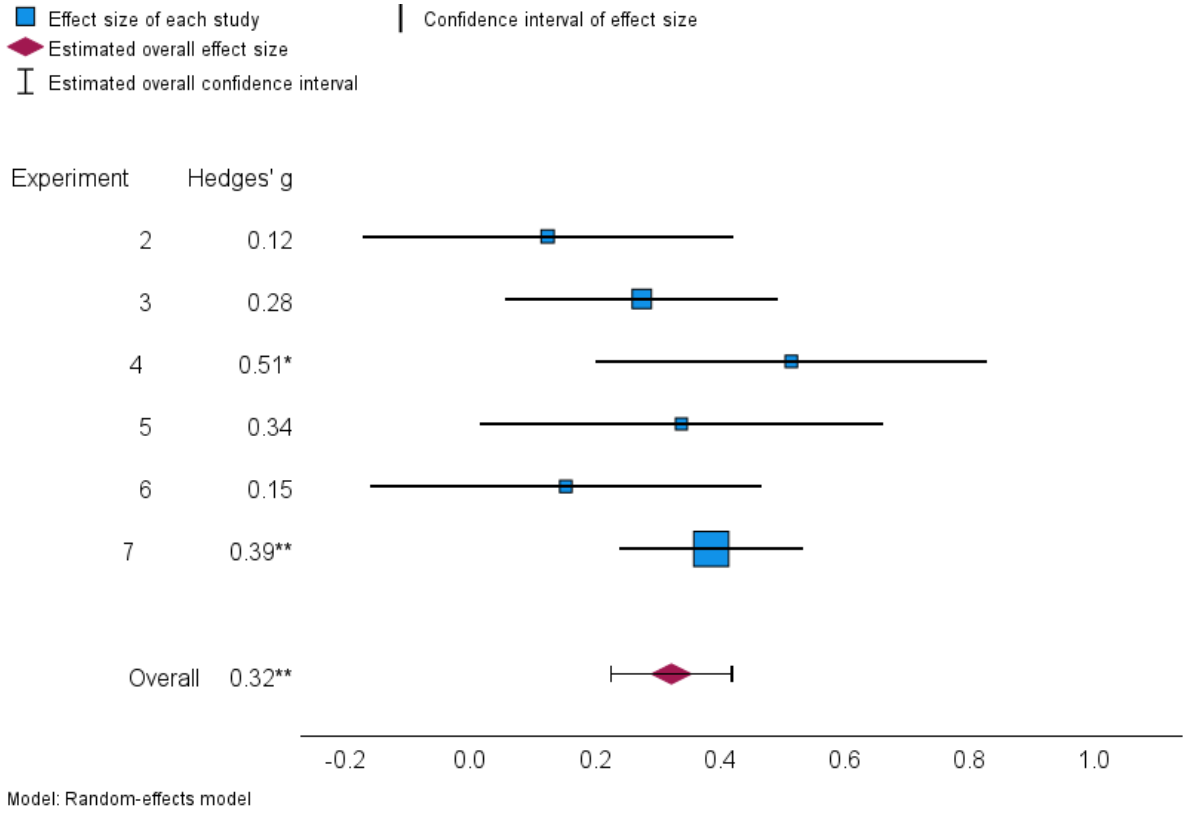
Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .0083, Bonferroni over 6 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Morality

The DPB emerged consistently on morality, with all six effect sizes positive and two (in Experiments 4 and 7) remaining statistically significant after correcting for multiple comparisons. Effect sizes ranged from g = 0.12 (Experiment 2) to g = 0.51 (Experiment 4). This pattern supports the view that death activates evaluative processes grounded in moral appraisal and ethical regard, even when effects are modest in size.

Figure 4

Forest Plot of Hedges' g Values for Morality Across Experiments 2–7



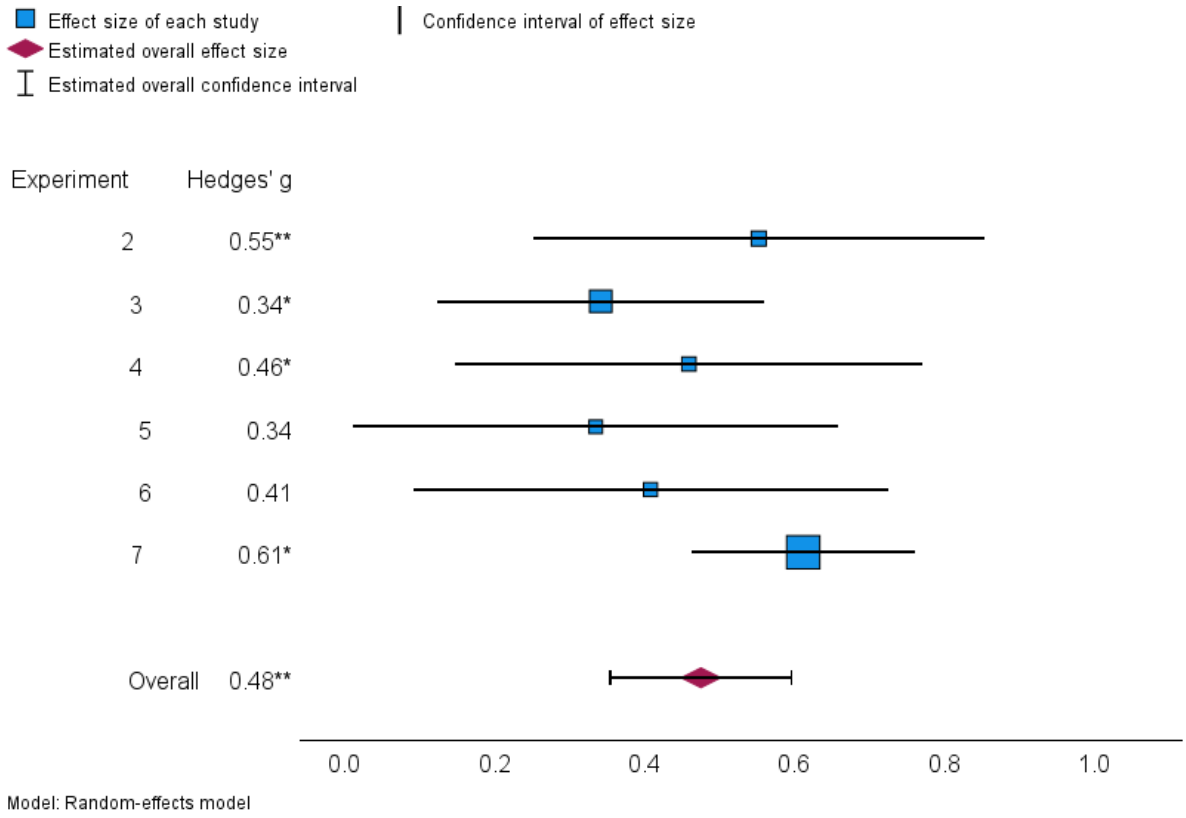
Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .0083, Bonferroni over 6 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Respect

Respect produced the most robust and consistent DPB across experiments. All six effects were positive, and four (Experiments 2, 3, 4, and 7) remained statistically significant after correction, ranging from $g = 0.34$ (Experiments 3 and 5) to $g = 0.61$ (Experiment 7). These findings support the interpretation that death triggers culturally normative expectations of reverence and admiration for targets.

Figure 5

Forest Plot of Hedges' g Values for Respect Across Experiments 2–7



Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .0083, Bonferroni over 6 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Trait-Level Summary

Across Experiments 2 through 7, the DPB emerged most consistently on traits reflecting interpersonal regard—namely liking, morality, and respect. Using random-effects models, the pooled mean effects were: respect $g = 0.48^{**}$, liking $g = 0.37^{**}$, warmth $g = 0.35^{**}$, morality $g = 0.32^{**}$, and competence $g = 0.17^{**}$. After applying Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons, the effect remained statistically significant in four experiments for respect (Experiments 2, 3, 4, and 7), and in two experiments for liking (Experiments 6, and 7), morality (Experiments 4 and 7), and warmth (Experiments 6 and 7).

Competence, by contrast, displayed smaller and less reliable effects, none of which remained significant after correction. This pattern indicates that the DPB is strongest for traits associated with moral worth and social value (respect, liking, and morality) and weaker for status-relevant attributes such as competence. Overall, these findings suggest that the bias primarily reflects enhanced perceptions of a deceased target's interpersonal and moral qualities, rather than generalised inflation across all evaluative domains.

Domain-Level Meta-Analytic Results

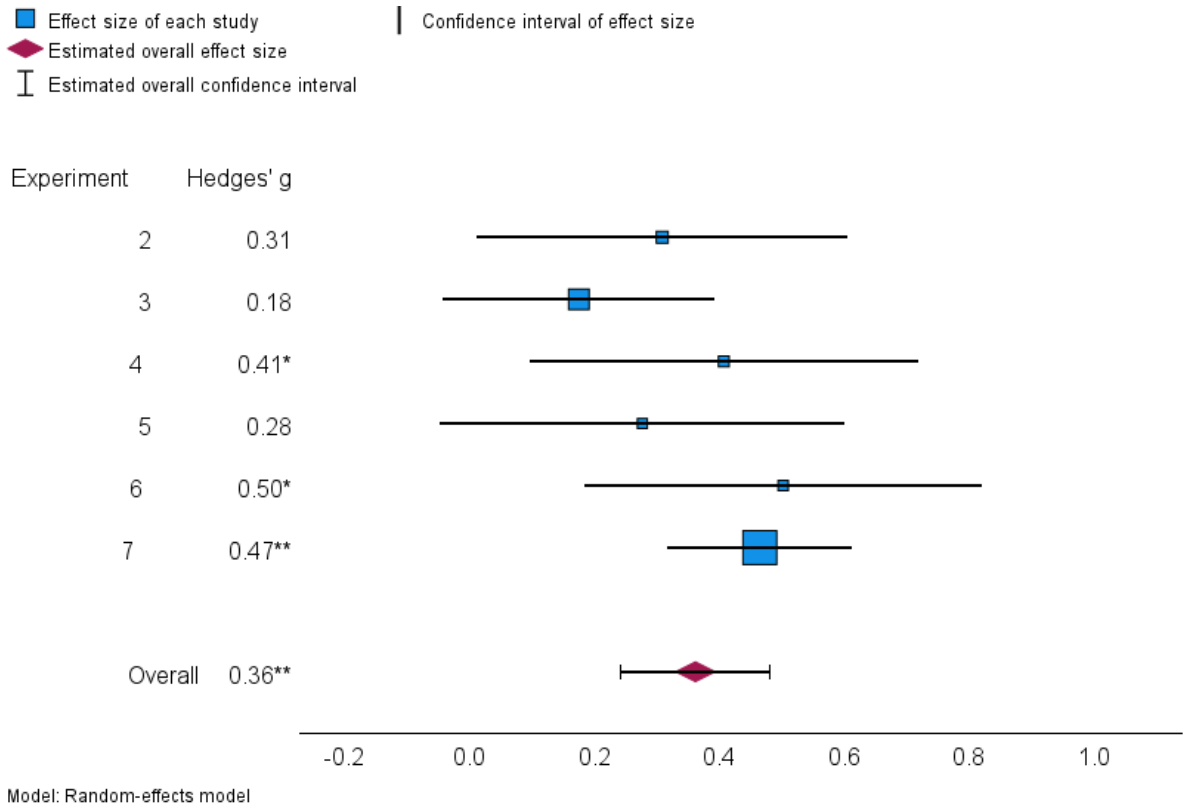
To examine whether the DPB generalises across interpersonal domains, I conducted a meta-analysis of composite scores reflecting Sociability, Morality, and Competence across Experiments 2–7. I computed each domain by averaging relevant trait measures: Morality combined morality and respect ratings; Sociability was represented by liking alone in Experiments 2 and 3, and by the average of warmth and liking in Experiments 4 through 7; and Competence was represented by competence ratings in all experiments. I calculated Hedges' g for each domain, comparing evaluations of deceased versus living targets. Because these domain-level analyses were conducted post hoc, I treated them as a single family of comparisons and applied a Bonferroni correction across the three domains ($\alpha = .05 / 3 = .0167$). I present the results in Table 17 and forest plots in Figures 6 through 8.

Sociability

The DPB on Sociability emerged reliably, with three of six experiments (Experiments 4, 6, and 7) showing statistically significant positive effects after correction. All effects were in the expected direction, with *g*-values ranging from 0.18 (Experiment 3) to 0.50 (Experiment 6). Deceased targets were perceived as more likeable and warmer than their living counterparts, particularly under conditions that foster interpretive engagement or activate affiliative norms. Although Experiments 2, 3, and 5 did not reach statistical significance, their consistent directionality reinforces the broader trend toward posthumous social elevation.

Figure 6

Forest Plot of Hedges' g Values for Sociability Across Experiments 2–7



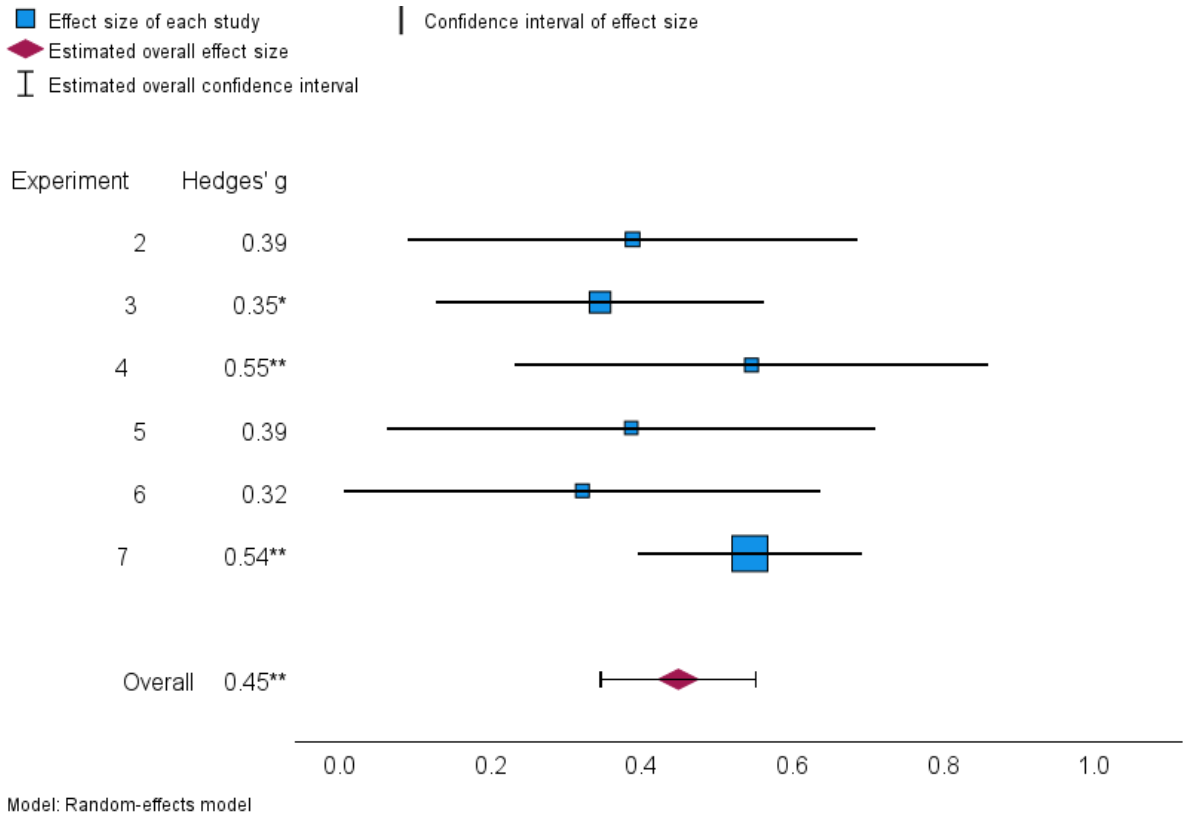
Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .017, Bonferroni over 3 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Morality

The DPB emerged consistently within the Morality domain, with three of six experiments (Experiments 3, 4, and 7) showing statistically significant differences favouring deceased targets after correction. All effects were positive, with *g*-values ranging from 0.12 (Experiment 2) to 0.55 (Experiments 4 and 7). These findings indicate that knowledge of a target's death tends to elevate moral appraisals, consistent with the view that posthumous evaluation is guided by judgements of moral worth and ethical regard. This domain-level consistency aligns with theoretical models emphasising the primacy of Morality in impression formation and reputational judgement.

Figure 7

Forest Plot of Hedges' g values for Morality Across Experiments 2–7



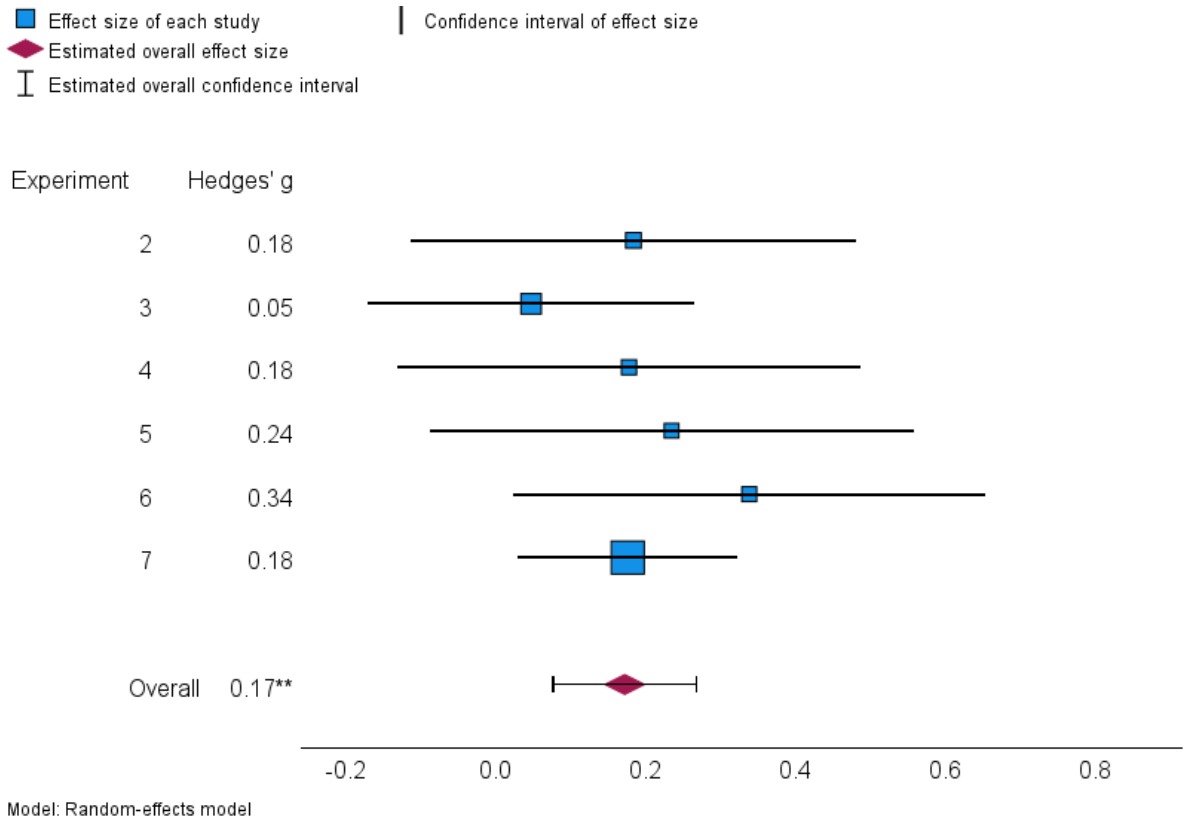
Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .017, Bonferroni over 3 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Competence

Competence manifested the weakest and least consistent evidence for the DPB. Across six experiments, effects were small; two studies produced nominal advantages for deceased targets (g = 0.34 in Experiment 6; g = 0.18 in Experiment 7), but neither survived familywise error control within experiment. Other experiments showed small, non-significant effects, ranging from g = 0.05 (Experiment 3) to 0.24 (Experiment 5). The pooled meta-analytic effect for Competence was small but reliable (g ≈ 0.17), indicating that any competence elevation is modest at best. Given the absence of corrected within-study effects and the likelihood that Experiments 6–7 introduced additional social-information cues (e.g., norm framing without a manipulation check in Experiment 6; audience framing that also conveyed target (un)popularity in Experiment 7), I interpret competence-related DPB effects cautiously.

Figure 8

Forest Plot of Hedges' g Values for Competence Across Experiments 2–7



Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .017, Bonferroni over 3 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Domain-Level Summary

Across Experiments 2–7, the DPB demonstrated a clear pattern of domain selectivity. Using random-effects models, the pooled mean effects were: Sociability g = 0.31**, Morality g = 0.39**, and Competence g = 0.17**. After applying a Bonferroni correction for the three domain-level tests (α = .05 / 3 = .0167), the DPB remained statistically significant in all three domains, though the strength and consistency of effects varied systematically across them.

The Morality domain yielded the most consistent evidence, with significant effects in three of six experiments (Experiments 3, 4, and 7) and uniformly positive estimates elsewhere. These findings underscore the moralising function of posthumous evaluation and support the view that death amplifies judgements of moral worth and ethical regard—core components of reputational appraisal.

Sociability showed a similarly reliable, though slightly less consistent, pattern, with three of six experiments (Experiments 4, 6, and 7) producing significant effects. Across studies, deceased targets were viewed as warmer and more likeable, particularly under conditions that heightened interpretive engagement or invoked affiliative norms. Even where results were non-

significant, their positive directionality reinforces the interpretation that death cues elicit prosocial and affiliative reconstruals of the target.

By contrast, Competence proved most resistant to death-related enhancement. Nominal effects appeared in Experiments 6 and 7, but did not survive per-experiment familywise correction; earlier studies showed smaller, non-significant estimates. This suggests that competence is not spontaneously elevated by mortality cues; the small domain-level meta-effect should be viewed as modest and context-dependent.

Overall, the domain-level analyses confirm that the DPB is selective rather than general. Death most reliably heightens perceptions of moral and affiliative character, while competence-related impressions remain comparatively stable. This domain-specific asymmetry highlights that the DPB reflects socially meaningful evaluative recalibration, not indiscriminate positivity.

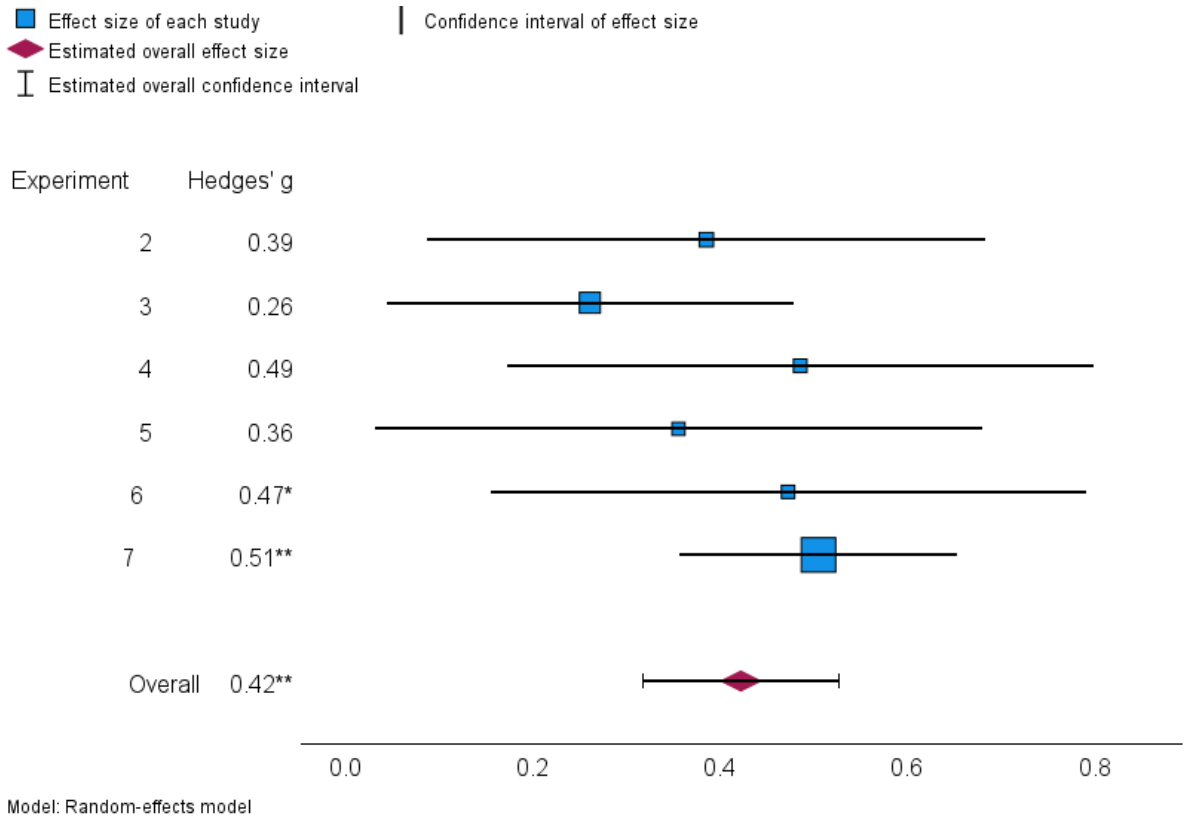
Composite-Level Meta-Analytic Results

To evaluate the overall strength of the DPB, I computed a composite score for each participant by averaging all five trait ratings (warmth, liking, competence, morality, and respect). This analysis provides a holistic measure of evaluative positivity. I calculated standardised mean differences (Hedges' *g*) for each experiment (Experiments 2–7), comparing ratings for deceased versus living targets. I present the results in Table 18 and a forest plot in Figure 9.

After applying a Bonferroni correction for multiple testing ($\alpha = .05 / 6 = .0083$, accounting for the traits and their composite), the DPB remained statistically significant in Experiments 6 and 7, with smaller, non-significant effects in earlier studies. All effects were positive, ranging from $g = 0.26$ (Experiment 3) to $g = 0.51$ (Experiment 7). Across varied samples and contextual framings, participants consistently evaluated deceased targets more favourably than living ones when all interpersonal traits were considered together.

Figure 9

Forest Plot of Hedges' g Values for the Composite Score Across Experiments 2–7



Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects after familywise correction at the trait level (α = .0083, Bonferroni over 6 tests); double asterisks denote $p < .001$.

Composite-Level Summary

The composite-level analysis revealed a consistent pattern of positive effects across all experiments, though statistical significance was retained only in Experiments 6 and 7 after correction. The random-effects pooled estimate for the composite was g = 0.37**, indicating a reliable overall tendency to evaluate deceased targets more favourably than living ones when all traits were considered together. Effect sizes ranged from g = 0.26 (Experiment 3) to g = 0.51 (Experiment 7), with the strongest and most reliable effects emerging in designs that embedded death within normative or communicative contexts.

This pattern suggests that while the DPB generalises across evaluative content, it intensifies under conditions that heighten the social meaning of death. The composite score therefore captures the broad evaluative impact of death on person perception, reinforcing that the bias reflects an integrated, domain-general uplift rather than isolated trait-level variation.

Sensitivity Analysis

Given the large sample size and corresponding influence of Experiment 7, I conducted a sensitivity analysis excluding it from all meta-analytic models. Across traits, domains, and the

overall composite, effect sizes remained positive and statistically significant, indicating that the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) was not driven solely by the largest sample. The pooled composite effect was g = 0.37 [95% CI 0.24, 0.50], compared with g = 0.42 in the full analysis. The magnitude of domain-level and trait-level effects decreased only modestly, with all estimates remaining within overlapping confidence intervals. These results confirm that the DPB persists across Experiments 2–6 and is not dependent on the inclusion of Experiment 7. For completeness, Table 19 presents the pooled estimates from the sensitivity models. Forest plots excluding Experiment 7 are omitted for brevity, as the pattern of effects was unchanged.

Table 19

Random-Effects Pooled Effect Sizes Excluding Experiment 7

Level	Variable	*g*	95% CI	*p*
Trait	Warmth	0.31	[0.11, 0.52]	.003
Trait	Liking	0.31	[0.19, 0.44]	<.001
Trait	Competence	0.17	[0.04, 0.30]	.008
Trait	Morality	0.28	[0.15, 0.40]	<.001
Trait	Respect	0.41	[0.28, 0.54]	<.001
Domain	Sociability	0.31	[0.18, 0.43]	<.001
Domain	Morality	0.39	[0.26, 0.52]	<.001
Domain	Competence	0.17	[0.04, 0.30]	.008
Composite	Overall	0.37	[0.24, 0.50]	<.001

Note. All effects are random-effects estimates computed across Experiments 2–6. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets.

Taken together, the sensitivity analysis reinforces the robustness of the DPB across diverse methodological contexts. I next integrate these findings to examine cross-experimental trends and theoretical implications.

Cross-Experiment Insights

The meta-analysis reveals that the DPB is both statistically robust and evaluatively selective. At the trait level, the strongest effects emerged for respect, morality, and liking traits associated with interpersonal regard and social value. These same traits contributed to the most consistent effects at the domain level. Morality yielded significant posthumous elevation in three experiments (3, 4, and 7) and was directionally positive elsewhere. Sociability showed

reliable effects, reaching significance in three of six experiments (4, 6, and 7) and trending positive in the remainder. Competence, by contrast, produced smaller and less reliable effects, not reaching significance in any experiment.

This DPB does not reflect a generalised leniency or halo effect applied indiscriminately across traits. Rather, it selectively amplifies appraisals of decency, warmth, and respect in response to a target's death. This trait-selectivity was evident not only within experiments but across the aggregated trends. Evaluative uplift was strongest on traits tied to moral meaning and social cohesion, whereas status-related traits such as competence showed only modest or context-sensitive gains. These cross-experiment insights reinforce the interpretation of the DPB as a structured and bounded evaluative shift, one that preferentially targets domains aligned with normative remembrance and prosocial idealisation. Together, these results indicate that norm content alone is insufficient; the DPB strengthens when audience goals render norm adherence reputationally relevant.

Theoretical Integration

The findings align closely with theoretical frameworks that prioritise Sociability and Morality in person perception. The consistent effects of the DPB on these domains support models such as the Moral Primacy hypothesis (Brambilla et al., 2011), which holds that moral character is the foundational axis of impression formation. Morality and Sociability signal a person's value as a social partner and group member, and their amplification in posthumous evaluation suggests that death activates relational and reputational concerns.

The domain-level organisation of results further clarifies the structure of the DPB. What might otherwise appear as a diffuse pattern of significant traits—respect here, liking there—emerges as a coherent signal once mapped onto the interpersonal domains framework. The DPB targets the domains that are most essential to social affiliation and moral worth, confirming the bias aligns with social-relational theories of impression formation.

Crucially, the findings also support a view of the DPB as socially contingent rather than purely affective. The DPB did not operate uniformly but was consistently stronger for traits central to prosocial memory and moral storytelling. That is, knowledge of a target's death prompts a selective reappraisal that aligns with how one culturally and socially prefers to remember others: as kind, decent, and deserving of respect. This reinforces the view that the DPB is not an indiscriminate positivity judgement but a psychologically structured response to a socially meaningful cue.

Methodological Contribution

This meta-analysis showcases the value of cumulative design and theoretical integration in experimental social psychology. All six experiments synthesised here employed consistent methodologies: ambiguous vignettes, standardised trait measures, and between-subjects manipulation of target. This procedural homogeneity enabled meaningful meta-analytic integration and supported the use of random-effects pooling to estimate the mean DPB across related implementations.

By adding random-effects pooling to a methodologically coherent set of studies, this meta-analysis characterises the DPB as a mean tendency across a family of ambiguity-based paradigms rather than as a single common effect. The approach accommodates design-level variation introduced by norm framing, audience goals, and group membership while preserving comparability through shared measures and procedures.

The consistency of findings across varied manipulations—group identity, norm framing, audience context—demonstrates the robustness of the DPB under diverse social framings. Moreover, the use of preregistered designs and large samples in later studies (Experiments 4-7) helped to clarify boundary conditions and enabled detection of more modest effects (e.g., on competence). These cumulative design elements exemplify best practices in social psychological research: replication, refinement, and theory-guided analysis.

By structuring this research programme around an explicit theoretical taxonomy—the interpersonal domains—the present work advances not only empirical knowledge of the DPB but also the modelling of evaluative bias more generally. It shows how seemingly isolated trait effects can be theoretically organised, statistically synthesised, and conceptually integrated.

Meta-Analytic Limitations

Despite its strengths, this meta-analysis is constrained by several limitations. First, I drew all data from a single research programme conducted within a shared laboratory context. Although this consistency enhances internal validity, it also limits generalisability to broader populations, designs, and evaluative contexts. The stimuli used, a set of fictional lay biographies, represent only a narrow slice of the impression formation landscape.

Second, the random-effects estimates are based on a small number of studies per outcome (four for warmth; six for other traits), which can yield imprecise estimates of between-study variance and, in turn, wider uncertainty around the pooled *g*. Although the studies share core features, unmodelled moderators (e.g., subtle wording differences, participant pools) may contribute to heterogeneity not explicitly tested here.

Third, as a further robustness check, I conducted a sensitivity analysis excluding Experiment 7, which contributed the largest sample and therefore exerted substantial statistical weight in the pooled estimates. Across all traits, domains, and the composite measure, the DPB remained positive and statistically significant, with only modest reductions in effect magnitude. This confirms that the overall pattern of results was not driven by a single high-powered study and strengthens confidence in the generalisability of the observed effects across experiments.

Fourth, composite scores did not account for intercorrelations among dependent measures. Though this decision was theoretically defensible—aimed at preserving the conceptual coherence of each interpersonal domain—it limits precision in estimating unique variance contributions. Future research might employ multivariate meta-analytic models to better capture the structure of evaluative judgements.

Finally, the domains framework introduces measurement heterogeneity: Sociability is represented by liking alone in Experiments 2–3 but by warmth and liking in later studies. Random-effects models tolerate (but do not resolve) this variation, so comparisons across experiments require interpretive care.

Collectively, these limitations underscore the bounded scope of the current findings. Nonetheless, the meta-analysis offers compelling evidence that the DPB is a systematic and replicable phenomenon, shaped by interpersonal meaning and evaluative selectivity.

General Discussion

Overview and Integration of Thesis Aims

In this thesis, I investigated the DPB, namely, the tendency to evaluate deceased individuals more favourably than otherwise identical living ones. Across seven experiments and a meta-analytic synthesis, I examined the robustness, domain specificity, and psychological mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. I pursued four overarching aims: (1) testing whether the DPB generalises to lay, unfamiliar targets; (2) examining its domain specificity via the three-dimensional framework of Sociability, Morality, and Competence; (3) identifying boundary conditions such as ambiguity and group membership; and (4) providing a theoretically grounded explanation of when and why the DPB arises.

I developed an experimental programme that progressed from demonstrations of the DPB to more sophisticated tests of its boundary conditions and underlying mechanisms. I began by examining whether the DPB emerges in evaluations of unfamiliar individuals described in neutral (Experiment 1) or richer, mixed terms (Experiment 2). The initial pattern suggested, without directly testing, that posthumous uplift is more detectable when

descriptions invite inference. Experiment 1 was also relatively underpowered, so inferences from its nulls are cautious.

In Experiments 3 and 4, I tested whether the DPB generalises across group boundaries by manipulating the target's national affiliation (British, Andorran, or Russian). The DPB emerged in both experiments, regardless of group membership, suggesting that reverence-based positivity can extend to outgroup members in the absence of explicit antagonism. I then turned to the role of social norms: whether the DPB is predicted by individual norm endorsement (Experiment 5) or moderated by exposure to norm framing (Experiment 6). Although these experiments did not show that norm cues moderated the DPB, their findings indicate that posthumous idealisation persists even when reverence norms are made explicit. This implies that the DPB reflects implicit social scripts or reputational heuristics rather than deliberate norm compliance. Finally, in Experiment 7 I examined the DPB under an audience framing (favourable vs. unfavourable). The DPB replicated across outcomes, audience main effects were strong, but the Status × Audience interaction did not survive familywise error control; moreover, the manipulation likely introduced social-information cues about the target.

This experimental progression reflects both theoretical and methodological refinement. Early experiments established the enabling conditions for the DPB, whereas later experiments probed moderators. Throughout, I implemented a consistent domain-based framework, assessing evaluations across Sociability (warmth, liking), Morality (morality, respect), and Competence (competence). This structure allowed for within- and between-experiment comparisons, as well as a meta-analytic synthesis that quantified the strength and consistency of the DPB across experiments. The design logic was cumulative: each experiment introduced a new conceptual or methodological element while retaining the core manipulation of mortality status, enabling systematic exploration of the DPB across contexts.

Several methodological innovations distinguish this thesis from prior research. First, I used unfamiliar, lay targets rather than public figures, high-status individuals, or lay individuals familiar to the target. This controlled for reputation-based inferences and allowed for clean variation in evaluative ambiguity across studies. Second, I adopted a theoretically grounded interpersonal domain framework, enabling a more nuanced assessment of where the DPB manifests. Rather than treating traits such as competence, respect, or liking as independent outcomes, I categorised them according to their underlying social functions. Third, I introduced novel manipulations of normative and communicative context. By examining the effects of norm salience, audience valence, and group membership, I was able to test whether the DPB is fixed or context sensitive. Finally, I synthesised findings using meta-analytic techniques to

quantify trait- and domain-level effects. This allowed me to assess trait-level and domain-level consistency and to evaluate the DPB as a generalisable, theoretically interpretable effect.

In all, this thesis offers the first comprehensive investigation of the DPB in evaluations of unfamiliar, lay targets. It provides new evidence for the domain specificity and selective expression across contexts of the DPB, describes conditions under which it appeared more often, and helps to clarify the cognitive and motivational factors associated with how the dead are perceived. In the sections that follow, I summarise the main findings, discuss their theoretical and methodological implications, outline limitations and directions for future research, and reflect on the broader significance of understanding how death alters social judgement.

Summary of Key Findings

Across seven experiments, I examined the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) using unfamiliar, lay targets and a consistent interpersonal-domain framework. The results show that the DPB is a selective yet replicable evaluative pattern, emerging reliably for traits associated with Sociability and Morality, but not for Competence. Across contexts, participants consistently evaluated deceased targets more favourably on warmth, liking, morality, and respect, but not on competence. Composite evaluations mirrored this pattern, indicating that the bias reflects coordinated sociomoral uplift rather than a diffuse halo.

The DPB did not appear automatically. In Experiment 1, where the vignette described a neutral target with minimal evaluative content, there was no evidence of status-based differences on any measure. This null baseline demonstrated that *mere knowledge of death* does not elicit positivity in the absence of descriptive cues. From Experiment 2 onward, vignettes were written with more interpretive richness, enabling participants to infer both positive and negative traits. Although the designs did not include a direct comparison of ambiguous versus unambiguous stimuli, the emergence of the DPB only after this change suggests that evaluative underdetermination may create the interpretive space in which posthumous positivity arises. Accordingly, claims about ambiguity are best understood as inferential, not experimentally confirmed.

In Experiments 2 and 3, participants again evaluated lay targets described in mixed, everyday terms. The DPB emerged selectively on respect in both studies, with no other traits reaching the corrected significance threshold. Experiment 4 introduced a socially distant, politically disfavoured outgroup (Russian), and the bias persisted for morality and respect and extended to the overall composite, while warmth and liking showed positive but nonsignificant trends. Competence was unaffected across all three studies, indicating that the DPB

generalises across group boundaries when antagonism is not made salient but remains concentrated in moral rather than ability-based judgements.

Experiments 5 and 6 examined whether social norms shape or moderate the DPB. In Experiment 5, I tested whether individual differences in norm endorsement predicted the bias. Across all outcomes, there were no significant Status × Norm interactions and no main effects of target status, indicating that privately endorsed reverence norms neither moderated nor produced the DPB. In Experiment 6, I manipulated normative context directly by exposing participants to a brief text that either endorsed or criticised the convention against speaking ill of the dead. Again, the manipulation did not moderate the bias, but a main effect of target status emerged: deceased targets were evaluated more positively on warmth, liking, and the overall composite, with other traits, including competence, nonsignificant. These findings suggest that the DPB persists even when normative content is made explicit, but is not explained by internalised or externally primed social norms.

In Experiment 7, I examined whether the evaluative context of communication influences posthumous impressions. Participants were told they were describing the target to someone who either liked (favourable audience) or disliked him (unfavourable audience). Deceased targets were evaluated more positively on warmth, liking, morality, and respect, as well as on the overall composite, replicating the DPB across all key domains. However, no significant interaction emerged between target status and audience condition once correction was applied. On closer inspection, the manipulation may also have conveyed additional social information about the target (that he was liked or disliked by others), introducing a potential informational confound. Thus, while the DPB clearly persisted under audience framing, these findings cannot be interpreted as evidence that communicative goals causally moderate the bias.

Taken together, these experiments demonstrate that the DPB is robust, selective, and context tolerant. It emerges consistently for traits tied to social warmth and moral standing, most reliably for respect (significant in 4 of 6 experiments that used ambiguous bios: 2, 3, 4, 7), and remains absent for competence across all studies. The composite index followed this pattern, reaching significance in Experiments 4, 6, and 7, where multiple sociomoral traits shifted together. The absence of any significant moderation by norm endorsement, norm framing, or audience context in this paradigm indicates that the DPB cannot here be reduced to explicit normative beliefs or strategic self-presentation. Rather, it reflects a stable evaluative asymmetry: perceivers view the deceased through a lens of elevated sociomoral regard that endures across contextual variations and resists explicit counter-normative cues.

In terms of magnitude, significant status main effects in individual studies accounted for roughly 3–9% of variance in their respective outcomes (partial $\eta^2 \approx .03–.09$; e.g., respect in Exp. 7 $\eta^2 = .092$; composite in Exp. 7 $\eta^2 = .067$; warmth in Exp. 6 $\eta^2 = .061$; liking in Exp. 6 $\eta^2 = .051$; morality in Exp. 4 $\eta^2 = .063$; respect in Exp. 4 $\eta^2 = .050$; composite in Exp. 4 $\eta^2 = .056$). Pooled effects were small-to-moderate (e.g., composite $g \approx .42$, approximately $r \approx .20$, $\approx 4\%$ variance). Given the minimal, anonymous stimuli and between-subjects designs, these shifts are modest but theoretically meaningful.

Although the designs did not permit a direct test of the enabling role of ambiguity, the pattern of results across Experiments 1–7 supports the interpretation that posthumous uplift emerges only when the evaluative context allows inference, not when descriptions are emotionally flat or informationally complete. Across six experiments employing richer descriptions, the DPB reappeared consistently and with a structured profile—strongest for respect, moderate for liking and warmth, variable for morality, and null for competence. The findings thus delineate a clear empirical contour: the DPB reflects selective sociomoral enhancement under interpretive latitude, not a generalised halo or norm-driven response.

Theoretical Contributions

Contribution to Person Perception Theory

This research contributes substantially to the literature on person perception by revealing how trait impressions shift in response to mortality cues in a structured, domain-specific fashion. Across seven experiments and a meta-analytic synthesis, I examined the DPB using an interpersonal domain framework (Sociability, Morality, Competence) grounded in the literature, and found clear evidence that posthumous positivity is not distributed uniformly. Across studies using richer, mixed descriptions, the DPB appeared most often on sociomoral outcomes, especially respect, with competence largely unchanged. Audience framing did not moderate the DPB after correction. This challenges the view that posthumous positivity reflects a diffuse or automatic bias. Instead, it supports the view that impressions are filtered through structured cognitive frameworks that prioritise certain domains of person information over others, depending on the context and social function of the judgement.

The most consistent and robust effects appeared in the Morality domain, particularly for respect, which showed a significant DPB in four of the six experiments that used ambiguous biographies (Experiments 2, 3, 4, and 7). This finding aligns with a growing consensus in person perception research that moral character plays a privileged role in impression formation. Moral traits are seen as more central, stable, and identity-defining than either Sociability or Competence traits (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Goodwin, 2015; Wojciszke, 2005). The current

results are consistent with this view: knowledge that a person has died reliably elevated respect, and in places morality, even when no morally diagnostic behaviour was described. In this way, death itself appears to serve as a moral cue, prompting perceivers to revise or elevate moral impressions in the absence of concrete evidence (i.e., when targets are described ambiguously).

Sociability-related traits (liking and warmth) also responded to mortality cues, though with more variability across experiments. Liking was significant in two experiments (6 and 7) and otherwise trended in the predicted direction. In ambiguous evaluative contexts, perceivers may not only ascribe greater moral worth to the deceased but may also infer increased interpersonal warmth or social likeability. Such inferences may reflect a broader affiliative impulse: to speak and think well of the dead as a means of preserving social harmony, honouring collective norms, or avoiding discomfort. However, unlike moral traits, Sociability traits were more contextually sensitive to interpersonal framing, particularly in audience-relevant conditions (Experiment 7) or when norm salience was heightened (Experiment 6). This finding dovetails with models in which Sociability is interpreted as an adaptive, surface-level signal of approachability rather than a deeper reflection of character.

Competence, by contrast, was the most resistant to posthumous idealisation. Across experiments, Competence effects did not reach significance; and where estimates trended positive, they were smaller than effects on Morality or Sociability. This provides further support for the claim that competence occupies a distinct position in the evaluative hierarchy. It is less emotionally valenced, less identity-relevant, and often more context-dependent than moral or affiliative traits (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Fiske et al., 2007; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). The findings suggest that competence may require more explicit justification for positive revision, such as cues that the deceased fulfilled valued roles, contributed productively, or conformed to social norms. In the absence of such cues, competence remains largely unaffected by mere knowledge of death. This asymmetry underscores the importance of functional differentiation among the interpersonal domains and demonstrates that even well-established traits do not respond uniformly to changes in status or context.

Together, these findings offer three distinct theoretical contributions to person perception research. First, they apply the tripartite domain model as an organising lens for the DPB. Using Sociability, Morality, and Competence clarified *where* effects tended to emerge across studies. I did not test or validate the model itself, so my use of it should be considered as analytic structure rather than as evidence for its measurement validity.

Second, the pattern aligns with accounts that prioritise moral information in global evaluation, insofar as sociomoral traits (especially respect and, in places, morality) appeared more often than competence. However, I did not test domain-by-status interactions. As such, I cannot claim that moral information is causally primary in the DPB.

Third, the findings illustrate an uneven pattern of DPB expression across domains: sociomoral outcomes were more frequently affected than competence. This unevenness should be interpreted descriptively rather than as evidence that trait weights are differentially caused by status, as I did not test whether the status effect is statistically moderated by domain.

Finally, the results indicate that death functions not merely as a categorical shift in status, but as a psychologically meaningful cue that reshapes the structure of person perception. Unlike prior research, which has largely treated death as a status variable that triggers generic evaluative uplift, my findings suggest that mortality cues guide perceivers toward specific evaluative domains, especially morality and Sociability, even when the target's behaviour is ambiguous or morally neutral. This pattern implies that trait impressions are not only revised in light of death but reorganised in systematic ways. This reorganisation may occur because mortality cues activate representational schemas that prioritise morally and socially meaningful traits. Decades of research in person perception suggest that moral character is perceived as central, stable, and identity-defining (Goodwin, 2015; Wojciszke et al., 1998), whereas Sociability signals affiliative value and social harmony (Fiske et al., 2007). These domains are not only cognitively salient but also socially functional. When a person is known to be deceased, perceivers may be less concerned with future-oriented traits like competence and more attuned to traits that support memorial coherence, moral closure, or social respect. In this sense, death may act as a cue that activates evaluative scripts structured by evolutionary and cultural pressures, such as the need to honour the dead to maintain group cohesion (Atran & Henrich, 2010) or to avoid reputational risk by speaking ill of someone who can no longer respond (Allison et al., 2023). Thus, the DPB can be understood not simply as a sentiment-driven response, but as a reflection of deeper cognitive architecture: a system that differentially weights trait domains in response to finality, absence, and social meaning. By documenting how trait impressions shift in patterned, domain-specific ways following a mortality cue, this thesis offers insight into the representational flexibility of person perception and opens a novel lens on the social psychology of posthumous judgement.

Implications for Research on Evaluative Biases

In addition to its contributions to person perception theory, this thesis also speaks to broader models of evaluative bias. It demonstrates that the DPB operates not as a generalised halo, but as a context-sensitive and domain-specific evaluative shift. Classical accounts of the halo effect (Thorndike, 1920; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) suggest that positive sentiment in one trait domain diffuses across others, often regardless of the trait content or situational relevance. However, the DPB does not follow this pattern. Across six experiments involving ambiguous vignettes, I found that the DPB emerged reliably in the Morality and Sociability domains, but only rarely in Competence. Even when composite scores showed consistent effects, this was driven by the repeated elevation of moral and affiliative traits, not by uniform positivity. This structured pattern reveals a form of evaluative asymmetry that challenges the assumption that biases of this kind are undifferentiated or globally applied.

Crucially, the DPB was shown to be conditional. It did not appear in Experiment 1, where the vignette was emotionally neutral and evaluatively flat, and its strength varied systematically across experiments. The DPB appeared in Experiments 2–4 that used richer biographical descriptions, and it also appeared under audience framing in Experiment 7. However, ambiguity was not experimentally contrasted with unambiguous content, and the Status × Audience interaction did not survive correction. The norm-focused experiments (Experiments 5 and 6) showed that even when participants encountered direct cues about how the dead should be treated, or differed in their endorsement of such norms, the DPB persisted in the absence of moderation. These results support a conceptualisation of evaluative bias, not as a fixed cognitive distortion, but rather as a flexible outcome shaped by representational activation, motivational pressure, and communicative demand.

In doing so, this thesis advances several core theoretical models in the bias literature. First, it engages with accessibility theory (Higgins et al., 1977; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991) by demonstrating that death cues may activate reverence-related schemas (such as respect, moral dignity, or social harmony), which guide trait attribution when behavioural information is ambiguous. In this view, the DPB is not irrational, but arises from the heightened accessibility of positive moral constructs in death-relevant contexts. Second, the findings build on the motivated reasoning literature (Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1990) by showing that perceivers favour prosocial interpretations of ambiguous traits in the deceased, not due to accuracy goals but due to reputational risk, cultural taboo, or self-image maintenance. Although prior research has examined motivated cognition in politically or morally charged domains (Ditto et al., 2019; Taber & Lodge, 2006), this thesis applies the framework to a novel and psychologically rich case: how people reason about those who can no longer defend themselves. Third, and

perhaps most compellingly, the results substantiate claims from impression management theory (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), showing that trait evaluations of the deceased can serve self-presentational ends. Experiment 7 in particular showed that the DPB persisted under audience framing; audience main effects were strong, but the Status × Audience interaction did not survive correction, and the manipulation likely introduced social information about the target.

Together, these findings position the DPB as a theoretically instructive form of evaluative bias. It exemplifies how person perception operates not in a vacuum, but at the intersection of accessibility, motivation, and communication. It reveals how culturally scripted expectations surrounding death can shape not only emotional responses, but the very structure of trait cognition. More broadly, this research calls for a refinement of bias theory itself toward models that treat bias not as a stable cognitive flaw, but as a flexible, adaptive response to uncertainty, audience demands, and normative expectation.

Bridging Person Perception and Death Psychology

This thesis offers a novel theoretical bridge between the literatures on person perception and death psychology by conceptualising the DPB as a context-sensitive form of posthumous moralisation. Previous research on death and memory has often focused on affective or existential responses to mortality (such as grief, reverence, or terror management; Bonnano, 2009; Klass et al., 1996; Stroebe et al., 2005; Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Greenberg et al., 1997), whereas person perception research has largely examined trait inference under conditions of social interaction or impression formation. This thesis brings these traditions into direct conversation by showing how knowledge that someone is deceased alters the cognitive architecture of social evaluation. Specifically, perceivers do not simply feel more positively toward the deceased; rather, they systematically reweight trait importance, giving disproportionate emphasis to moral and affiliative characteristics while treating competence as peripheral or context-dependent, consistent with recent work showing that moral character is often the most central dimension in impression formation (Goodwin, 2015; Uhlmann et al., 2015). This pattern reflects established structure in person perception while being uniquely triggered by symbolic cues related to death.

What emerges is a view of the DPB as a psychologically structured response to mortality that serves dual functions: moral elevation and memorial coherence. This explains why the dead are often spoken of with disproportionate kindness, not simply out of emotional sentiment, but because death cues activate evaluative schemas that prioritise moral worth and social harmony, traits most aligned with eulogistic remembrance and communal ideals. This

tendency may also be affectively reinforcing, consistent with work on moral elevation and the dynamic moral self (De Groot & Leith, 2018; Monin & Jordan, 2009), whereby prosocial narratives elicit not just cognitive shifts, but emotional uplift aligned with virtue-based identity construction. In this sense, the DPB reflects what might be termed retrospective impression formation: a mode of social cognition tuned for retrospective interpretation, moral narrative, and symbolic closure. Unlike traditional person perception, which prioritises traits relevant for behavioural prediction (e.g., competence, dominance), posthumous evaluation is governed by different cognitive priorities, namely, identity meaning, moral resolution, and social affiliation (Klass et al., 1996).

This perspective also extends theories of moral typecasting (Gray & Wegner, 2009), which posit that people are categorised either as moral agents (capable of doing good or harm) or moral patients (deserving of protection and reverence; Gray et al., 2012). The DPB may reflect a shift in perceived moral role from agent to patient following death, a transition that invites moral elevation, inhibits criticism, and reduces the salience of functional traits like competence. This transformation may parallel other cases where moral evaluation retroactively reshapes perceived agency and intention, as demonstrated in Knobe's (2003) findings. In his experiments, participants judged a morally negative side effect (e.g., harming the environment) as more intentional than an equally foreseeable but morally positive one (e.g., helping the environment), even when the agent's indifference to both outcomes was explicitly stated. This asymmetry shows how moral valence can shape perceived intentionality, suggesting that posthumous targets, once no longer active agents, may be reclassified as moral patients and thus become objects of moral concern and reverence. At the same time, the DPB interacts with self-presentational and communicative concerns, as shown in Experiment 7, where participants elevated the dead more when addressing a favourable audience. These findings indicate that posthumous moralisation is both cognitively driven and socially responsive: the DPB reflects deep-rooted representational structures in person perception, but also adapts to reputational and communicative cues about how the dead should be spoken of. This dual sensitivity was especially evident in Experiment 7, where participants idealised the deceased under audience framing; audience main effects were strong, but the Status × Audience interaction did not survive correction, and the manipulation likely introduced social-information cues. This suggests posthumous evaluations are structured by moral cognition and can be socially responsive, though causal moderation by audience remains unconfirmed.

By documenting the structure, selectivity, and contingencies of the DPB, this thesis offers a psychologically grounded account of how death reorganises the moral architecture of

social cognition. It contributes to death psychology by identifying a concrete, replicable bias that governs how the deceased are remembered; and it contributes to person perception by demonstrating how trait ascription shifts in response to non-behavioural, symbolic status cues. In bridging these literatures, the DPB provides a compelling model of how mortality can reorder cognitive priorities, not just emotionally but representationally, reshaping the very dimensions through which people remember and morally frame those who are gone.

Methodological Innovations

This thesis also contributes methodologically by introducing several innovations that expand the empirical toolkit for studying posthumous evaluation. The DPB literature has relied heavily on public figures, status-laden roles, and often unstructured impressions drawn from media narratives or memory-based judgements. Here, I employed experimentally controlled, ecologically plausible designs that allowed for fine-grained causal inference and systematic testing of theoretical mechanisms. Across seven experiments and a meta-analytic synthesis, I refined the operationalisation of targets, traits, and contexts to isolate when and why the DPB emerges.

A first major innovation was the consistent use of lay, unfamiliar targets described in controlled vignettes. Whereas prior DPB experiments often focused on high-status individuals—whether real (e.g., politicians; Drzewiecka & Cwalina, 2020) or fictional (e.g., CEOs in culturally loaded roles; Allison et al., 2009; Allison & Eylon, 2005)—the present experiments minimised pre-existing evaluative scripts by introducing anonymous characters with no recognisable or distinct status markers. This design choice enabled greater experimental control and clearer attribution of observed effects to mortality status rather than to confounding variables such as fame, occupational norms, or memory salience. Moreover, by embedding these targets within vignettes that varied in descriptive richness and evaluative ambiguity, I was able to test whether the DPB requires interpretive latitude to emerge, a feature largely unexamined in earlier work.

Second, I introduced a domain-based framework for organising trait impressions, drawing from well-established models in person perception that distinguish Sociability, Morality, and Competence as the foundational domains of interpersonal evaluation (Abele et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2007). This structure allowed me to map individual trait effects (e.g., warmth, respect) onto broader social functions and to assess whether the DPB reflects diffuse positivity or targeted moral uplift. By applying this framework consistently across all experiments, I enabled cumulative comparisons and domain-level synthesis, culminating in a meta-analysis that quantified the strength and selectivity of the DPB across traits and domains.

This framework also allowed for theoretically meaningful contrasts. For instance, I treated competence not as an isolated outcome but as a test of whether the DPB reflects a general halo or a morally structured bias (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Goodwin, 2015).

A third innovation involved the development of novel manipulations targeting social-normative and communicative mechanisms. In Experiments 5 and 6, I introduced norm-based predictors and framings, measuring individual differences in endorsement of reverence norms, and manipulating exposure to social cues that either enforced or criticised such norms. These experiments tested theoretically grounded moderators, advancing understanding of the DPB's underlying social-cognitive mechanisms (Monin & Oppenheimer, 2014). In Experiment 7, I extended this logic to communicative context, introducing audience valence as a theoretically grounded moderator. By requiring participants to evaluate the deceased target for a favourable or unfavourable audience, I operationalised reputational incentive in a manner rarely used in DPB research; the Status × Audience interaction did not survive correction, limiting causal inference (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). These manipulations added mechanistic depth to the thesis and established that the expression of the DPB is sensitive not only to content ambiguity, but also to the inferred social function of the evaluative act.

Finally, I introduced an internal meta-analytic synthesis, combining data across Experiments 2 to 7 to estimate the overall strength and consistency of the DPB. Although meta-analyses are increasingly common in psychological science (Lakens, 2013; McShane et al., 2019), few are integrated within a single programme of research. This approach provided a rigorous cross-validation of findings, distinguishing trait-level and domain-level effects, and allowing for precise generalisation claims. The meta-analytic structure also enabled important methodological clarifications, such as showing that composite trait scores often yielded significant effects (e.g., Experiments 4, 6, and 7) even where individual traits varied, and clarifying that competence effects did not emerge under the present manipulations. By embedding the meta-analysis within the experimental sequence, the thesis achieves a balance between within-study precision and cross-study generality.

Taken together, these methodological innovations advance inquiry into posthumous evaluation. They demonstrate how the DPB can be elicited, moderated, and interpreted using carefully designed manipulations, theoretically motivated trait structures, and contextually responsive experimental tasks. Beyond clarifying the mechanisms of the DPB, these tools provide a replicable template for future work on status change, evaluative asymmetry, and the psychology of reverence.

Limitations and Future Directions

Sample Composition and Generalisability

Although the present thesis offers a rigorous and internally coherent test of the DPB, the generalisability of its findings is shaped by the nature of its participant samples. Across all seven experiments, data were collected via Prolific and the University of Southampton's research participation portal, using UK-based participants in every case. These platforms enabled efficient recruitment of high-powered samples and allowed for strong experimental control. However, concerns about demographic representativeness remain. The UK median age is 40.7 years (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2023). Four experiments (Experiments 3, 5, 6, and 7) approximated or exceeded this benchmark, with mean participant ages of 39.97, 42.99, 41.41, and 42.11 years, respectively. In contrast, Experiments 1, 2, and 4, which relied on student samples, had substantially younger means of 19.99, 19.41, and 19.28 years. These age differences imply that generalisability concerns apply most clearly to the student-sample experiments, whereas the remainder of the thesis drew on more demographically representative populations. However, the presence of DPB effects in both student and non-student samples suggests that the phenomenon is not confined to a particular age group, reducing concern that demographic skew in the early experiments undermines their internal validity. Moreover, there is no a priori theoretical reason to expect that age would moderate the DPB. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the findings support the view that the DPB is psychologically generalisable across adult populations. Both Prolific and university samples may overrepresent digitally literate and research-engaged individuals, which could influence responsiveness to subtle social cues or experimentally induced norms (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017). These sampling features must be taken into account when considering the broader applicability of the findings.

Platform-specific norms may also have influenced how participants interpreted the vignettes or engaged with subtle manipulations. For instance, Prolific workers often participate in a high volume of online studies and may develop heuristics for identifying experimental aims or complying with perceived expectations (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020). Although I implemented manipulation checks, counterbalancing, and randomisation throughout, such strategies cannot fully eliminate demand characteristics, particularly in domains like posthumous evaluation, where social desirability and moral signalling may be especially salient.

Cultural variability presents a further challenge to generalisability. Despite the DPB being reliably observed across diverse manipulations within the UK context, reverence norms

and posthumous moralisation are likely to vary cross-culturally. In some societies, posthumous reputation is managed through ritualised mourning or collective memory, whereas in others, dead may be treated more critically or excluded from public discourse (Leming & Dickinson, 2016). Even the cultural salience of aphorisms such as "don't speak ill of the dead" cannot be assumed outside of Western, individualist societies. Although the interpersonal domains used here (Sociability, Morality, Competence) have demonstrated cross-cultural validity (Abele et al., 2008), the evaluative weight attached to each domain, and the social acceptability of posthumous praise or critique, may differ substantially between cultures.

Future research should examine the DPB in more demographically and culturally diverse samples. This includes extending tests to collectivist cultural contexts, older populations, and religious groups with distinct death rituals or commemorative practices. Cross-cultural designs that manipulate culturally specific death scripts, or compare posthumous impressions across societies, could reveal whether the DPB reflects a universal structure of memorial cognition or a context-bound evaluative norm. Longitudinal work could also assess whether the DPB is stable across time, or subject to normative change based on broader shifts in cultural narratives about death and morality.

Stimulus Design and Ecological Validity

The thesis relied on vignette-based designs to manipulate mortality status and systematically vary contextual features, such as evaluative ambiguity, group membership, normative cues, and communicative framing. This approach offered strong internal validity, which was essential to testing the causal mechanisms underlying the DPB. While the use of brief written vignettes necessarily departs from the richness of real-world remembrance contexts, this was a deliberate design choice to isolate mortality effects from confounds. Nonetheless, understanding how the DPB operates in ecologically richer or emotionally immersive settings remains an important direction for future research.

At the same time, broadening generalisability across stimuli need not rely on richer, naturalistic materials, which risk reintroducing familiarity or reputation and undermining experimental control. A more defensible route is systematic stimulus sampling: (i) many-item designs that rotate multiple ambiguous biographies across names and occupations; (ii) random-effects modelling that treats targets as random factors to generalise over stimuli; (iii) independent author pools to avoid idiosyncratic prose; (iv) modality variation without identity cues (e.g., text versus neutral text-to-speech audio, anonymised silhouettes rather than faces); and (v) pre-registered item banks with item-level meta-analytic pooling. These steps increase stimulus generality while preserving unfamiliarity and control.

In real-world contexts, impressions of the deceased are rarely formed through standardised text. They typically unfold in multimodal, emotionally textured environments: through eulogies, news coverage, social media posts, or personal memory. These settings are shaped by broader cultural scripts surrounding death, loss, and identity, such as norms of public mourning, expectations of posthumous respect, and narrative conventions that frame the deceased as morally redeemable or symbolically elevated. The vignettes used here, while designed to evoke neutrality or ambiguity, do not capture this affective complexity. Nor did they reflect the interpersonal dynamics of remembrance, where posthumous evaluations are often performative, relational, and narratively embedded. Although later experiments introduced contextual manipulations to simulate communicative constraints (e.g., audience valence), these remained within the written modality and did not approximate the emotional or social weight of real-world commemoration.

Moreover, the simplicity of the stimuli may have constrained certain effects. Participants may have engaged in shallow processing when reading brief character descriptions, particularly in online settings with limited attentional oversight. Such minimal stimuli may favour effects driven by accessible social norms (e.g., “don’t speak ill of the dead”), while underestimating more elaborate narrative or emotional inferences that richer depictions might evoke. The lack of behavioural detail, affective tone, or identity continuity in the vignettes further limited the representational richness typically involved in real-world remembrance.

Yet, the DPB emerged reliably even under these stripped-back, emotionally neutral conditions. This indicates that the DPB is not dependent on affective priming or interpersonal vividness. If anything, the use of minimal stimuli suggests that the effects observed here may represent a lower-bound estimate of the DPB’s real-world potency. More immersive or emotionally resonant formats could plausibly amplify posthumous idealisation, particularly in situations that involve shared cultural narratives, grief responses, or social signalling.

To address these limitations, future research could explore more naturalistic and affectively rich modes of stimulus presentation. For instance, video vignettes, audio memorials, or autobiographical memory prompts may allow for greater emotional engagement and narrative depth. Alternatively, experiments could simulate social media platforms or obituary contexts, where posthumous evaluation occurs in norm-laden and publicly visible settings. Such extensions would clarify how the DPB operates in everyday forms of memorial cognition and test whether its boundary conditions shift when emotional and interpersonal cues are foregrounded.

Domain Coverage and Measurement Precision

The interpersonal domain framework adopted in this thesis (Sociability, Morality, Competence) provided a principled structure for analysing trait-level effects of the DPB. By grouping traits according to their functional roles in person perception, this approach enabled theoretically grounded and internally coherent comparisons across experiments. Two methodological choices, however, constrained precision and comparability: the delayed inclusion of warmth as an indicator of Sociability, and the single-trait operationalisation of Competence (whereas Sociability and Morality were represented by two traits each).

The inclusion of warmth was delayed due to a conceptual transition in the project's development. The first three experiments were designed before the interpersonal domain framework had been adopted; at that stage, traits were selected primarily for face validity and coverage of core evaluative dimensions. From Experiment 4 onward, however, the thesis was explicitly reconceptualised in terms of Sociability, Morality, and Competence, prompting the inclusion of warmth as a key indicator of the Sociability domain. Although liking had previously served as a broad affiliative measure, warmth captures a more specific and theoretically grounded construct, in particular interpersonal approachability, benevolence, and friendliness. Additionally, Experiments 4, 6, and 7 permitted more differentiated assessment of Sociability, and in several cases, warmth showed a larger DPB than liking. This suggests that warmth may be especially sensitive to the social and emotional cues activated by posthumous status. However, its absence from earlier experiments limits longitudinal comparability across the full experimental sequence. Future research applying a domain-based framework should include warmth and liking together to ensure both conceptual and empirical coverage of the Sociability domain.

The multi-item scales used were psychometrically appropriate, but their structure reflected the constraints of survey-based designs. Trait ratings followed a standardised stem ("NAME is/was…") and included three to four items per construct. This strikes a balance between measurement precision and respondent burden but may still limit the ability to detect nuanced subcomponents within each domain. For example, competence was measured using three broad items ('competent,' 'effective at their job,' 'intelligent'), but future work could disaggregate this further into perceived skill, assertiveness, or task-relevance, especially given that competence effects were smaller and more context-dependent than those in other domains. Similarly, the Morality domain combined both trait-based morality and social-esteem related items, which may warrant separation in future analyses to test whether the DPB differentially elevates moral character versus social esteem.

A further measurement consideration concerns respect. The respect scale is semantically close to the colloquial prescription to "respect the dead." This proximity may have made respect the most sensitive outcome—not only because it taps deference but also because it echoes a widely known phrasing. To guard against wording-driven inflation, future work should (i) diversify deference indicators (e.g., esteem, regard, reverence) and include negativity-focussed items (e.g., willingness to criticise/derogate), (ii) pre-test items for perceived overlap with cultural aphorisms, and (iii) model any residual overlap as a method factor so effects are not artefacts of item wording.

In summary, this thesis implemented a domain-based framework with strong theoretical and empirical grounding. Measurement across experiments was consistent and based on multi-item scales. However, the delayed inclusion of warmth, the semantic proximity of respect to a common cultural aphorism, and the modest granularity of sub-trait dimensions highlight opportunities for refinement. Future research should ensure full domain coverage from the outset and consider expanding the dimensional precision of each construct, particularly in domains like Competence where effects may hinge on contextual salience or trait specificity. Beyond measurement scope, a conceptual limitation concerns what the DPB actually indexes: is it increased positivity, reduced negativity, and is death itself the active ingredient?

What Exactly is the DPB About?

The designs compared alive versus dead targets using unipolar positive traits. Absence of derogation is not identical to increased positivity: the injunction to "don't speak ill of the dead" may primarily suppress negative expression rather than amplify praise. Future work should (i) separate positive and negative judgments (bivariate scales; explicit praise vs. critique allowances), (ii) include outcomes that tolerate negativity (e.g., willingness to list faults or endorse mild criticism), and (iii) add status controls (e.g., gravely ill, injured, retired, permanently absent) to test whether vulnerability, finality, or social irreversibility—rather than death per se—accounts for the effect. Manipulating irreversibility (e.g., disappearance vs. confirmed death) would further adjudicate whether finality rather than mortality drives sociomoral uplift.

Theoretical Breadth and Alternative Explanations

The theoretical scope of thesis is necessarily bounded by the structure of the experimental programme. Specifically, the design choices that enabled causal identification of the DPB also constrained the range of mechanisms that could be directly tested. Several

potentially relevant psychological processes, particularly those involving affective arousal, mortality awareness, or identity threat, remain unaddressed or only indirectly examined.

A key theoretical limitation concerns the affective and cognitive drivers of the DPB. The reported experiments measured trait impressions under conditions of manipulated ambiguity, norm salience, or communicative constraint, but did not separately assess participants' emotional states or affective responses to the death manipulation. As such, it is unclear to what extent the DPB reflects an emotion-driven process (e.g., reverent affect, sympathy, or discomfort with speaking ill of the dead) versus a more abstract cognitive adjustment (e.g., moral schema activation or reputational inference). These processes map onto dual models of judgement in social psychology, where affective states guide evaluation via heuristic shortcuts (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007; Lerner et al., 2015), and cognitive mechanisms involve the activation of culturally shaped schemas or identity-defining traits (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011). Although the use of neutral or ambiguous vignettes helped isolate the DPB from overt emotional priming, the absence of direct affective measures limits the interpretive precision of these findings.

Moreover, several well-established mechanisms from the death psychology literature remain underexplored in the present research. Terror Management Theory, for instance, posits that reminders of death evoke existential anxiety and lead individuals to affirm cultural worldviews as a form of psychological defence (Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Although the current experiments did not explicitly prime participants' own mortality, it remains possible that evaluating a deceased target evokes a subtle form of mortality salience that triggers similar processes. Hayes (2016) partially explored this possibility, finding that praising a close other after imagining their death reduced death-thought accessibility, a key marker of death-related distress in Terror Management Theory. However, this effect was absent for disliked others, suggesting that mortality-related mechanisms may only account for the DPB in specific interpersonal contexts. The experiments in this thesis focused on unfamiliar, lay targets to avoid reputation-based confounds, which may have attenuated such affective responses. Nonetheless, future research could explore whether implicit mortality cues or grief-like affect are evoked even in low-familiarity settings. Relatedly, prior work on bereavement and continuing bonds suggests that emotional closeness to the deceased shapes idealisation via attachment processes and meaning reconstruction (Klass et al., 1996; Stroebe et al., 2005). These mechanisms likely amplify posthumous reverence in naturalistic settings, and could moderate the strength or content of the DPB in close-relationship contexts.

These limitations point to several directions for future research. First, experiments could manipulate self-relevant mortality awareness alongside evaluations of deceased others to test for interactive or additive effects. Second, researchers could vary emotional proximity to the target (perhaps using autobiographical memory, parasocial figures, or imagined closeness) to test how attachment or grief shapes the DPB. Third, future work could more directly differentiate between affective and cognitive mechanisms via dynamic judgement measures such as mouse-tracking or eye-tracking, which have been shown to capture real-time evaluative conflict and prioritisation (Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Stillman et al., 2020).

Taken together, the current thesis offers strong evidence about when and where the DPB arises and supports a socially strategic, context-sensitive account. However, it does not fully resolve how the DPB is produced at the mechanistic level, whether through emotion, cognition, or symbolic defence. Addressing these gaps will be essential to embedding the DPB within broader theories of moral cognition, impression formation, and mortality-related judgement.

Internal Validity and the Role of Controlled Experimentation

A central feature of this thesis is its prioritisation of internal over external validity. Across seven experiments, I designed a tightly controlled programme of research to test when, where, and how the Death Positivity Bias (DPB) emerges. This approach involved stylised vignette stimuli, anonymous and unfamiliar targets, and systematically manipulated contextual features such as ambiguity, norm salience, and audience valence. These design choices were not made in pursuit of ecological realism, but in the service of causal precision: to isolate the role of mortality cues in shaping trait impressions, independently of confounding variables such as fame, memory, or status-based expectations.

This rationale aligns with longstanding arguments in psychological science that internal validity is not subordinate to generalisability but often the very point of theory-driven research. As Mook (1983) famously argued, experiments can make valid contributions to psychological theory even when their conditions are artificial or unrepresentative, provided they demonstrate that a given phenomenon is possible under controlled circumstances. The goal, in such cases, is not to estimate population-level prevalence but to test whether theoretical principles hold in environments that rule out noise and ambiguity. Sherman (2024) extends this argument, proposing that psychological research should be evaluated not by its generalisability to all people, but by its ability to reveal lawful psychological processes in the participants studied. Under this view, findings obtained from tightly constrained laboratory-like conditions are not

inherently limited; they are clarifying, because they expose the structure of thought under known conditions.

Accordingly, the use of minimal vignettes, anonymous targets, and controlled trait measures in this thesis should not be viewed as methodological weaknesses. These features were essential to isolating the hypothesised mechanisms behind the DPB. Ambiguity was introduced via richer biographies in later studies, providing interpretive space to examine whether the DPB appears under such conditions; however, ambiguity was not factorially contrasted with unambiguous content. Targets were unfamiliar, not famous, because reputation introduces memory-based biases that confound evaluative judgements. The stylised framing of audience or norm salience was deliberate, providing clear tests of communicative and reputational mechanisms. While some may argue that these conditions lack ecological realism, such critiques miss the point: theory testing requires clarity over complexity, and artificiality is often the necessary price of explanatory power (Mook, 1983; Sherman, 2024). In short, the artificiality of the designs was a feature, not a flaw.

Crucially, this design logic produced a consistent pattern of findings across multiple experiments, platforms, and trait domains. Despite variation in contextual framing, target nationality, norm salience, and communicative goals, the DPB emerged reliably in the Morality and Sociability domains whenever ambiguity or reputational cues were present. Composite trait scores were significantly higher for deceased targets in Experiments 4, 6, and 7. These effects did not depend on cultural or reputational familiarity, and they were absent in the neutral baseline of Experiment 1. Such consistency across a structured experimental sequence supports the inference that the DPB reflects underlying cognitive and motivational mechanisms, not idiosyncratic features of particular samples or settings.

Although generalisability to other cultural or demographic contexts remains an open question, this thesis demonstrates that under controlled conditions, the DPB is a replicable, theoretically interpretable effect. The methodological artificiality required to establish this conclusion is not a limitation of the research, but its core strength. By privileging internal validity, this thesis achieves what Mook called “existence proof” of a phenomenon that, once demonstrated, invites further theoretical refinement and real-world investigation. Future research may use these findings as a foundation for testing the DPB in more naturalistic or emotionally rich contexts, once its underlying structure has been clarified through controlled experimentation.

Limitations: Conclusion

The considerations discussed in this section identify avenues for future research that extend, but do not challenge, the central claims of this thesis. Granted, sample composition was uneven across experiments, with several experiments drawing on younger student populations, and others sampling more broadly from the UK public. However, the DPB emerged in both groups, and there is no compelling theoretical reason to expect age would moderate the DPB, especially in the absence of self-relevant mortality cues. Similarly, although all participants were based in the UK, and cultural variability in posthumous reverence norms remains untested, the consistency of effects across diverse contexts suggests a degree of psychological generalisability.

The use of text-based vignettes introduced necessary trade-offs between ecological realism and experimental control. Yet the fact that the DPB emerged even under stripped-back, affectively neutral conditions implies that it does not depend on emotional priming or rich narrative scaffolding. Indeed, this strengthens the interpretation that the DPB reflects a generalisable inferential tendency, one that could plausibly be amplified in more affective or socially immersive environments. Relatedly, whereas the interpersonal domain framework was introduced partway through the thesis (resulting in delayed inclusion of the warmth measure), the overall structure of trait measurement was consistent, theoretically grounded, and sufficient to detect clear patterns of domain specificity.

Finally, although the design was not optimised to isolate affective from cognitive mechanisms, or to test existential or grief-related processes, it offered the clearest evidence to date of when, where, and in whom the DPB emerges. Addressing the remaining mechanistic questions (particularly regarding affect, mortality salience, and attachment) will refine scholarly understanding of why the DPB occurs. Nonetheless, the core contribution of this thesis remains intact: the DPB is a selective, replicable, and context-sensitive phenomenon that systematically shapes how the dead are evaluated. The methodological and theoretical limitations outlined above suggest avenues for future expansion, not fundamental weaknesses in the evidence presented.

Concluding Remarks

This thesis offers the first comprehensive investigation of the DPB in person perception. Across seven experiments and a meta-analytic synthesis, I demonstrated that the DPB, long presumed to arise primarily in evaluations of famous or valorised individuals, also emerges for unfamiliar, lay targets under controlled conditions. Crucially, I found that this effect is not indiscriminate or automatic. Instead, the DPB is selective, structured, and shaped by the broader social context in which evaluative judgements are made.

By applying a domain-based framework of Sociability, Morality, and Competence, I illustrated that the DPB most consistently elevates sociomoral traits—especially respect (and, where measured, warmth)—while competence remained unaffected. This pattern is consistent with accounts that emphasise the centrality of moral information in impression formation; I did not test domain-by-status interactions, so moral primacy in the DPB should be interpreted cautiously. Moreover, the DPB persisted across contextual manipulations. Claims about ambiguity are inferential (not experimentally confirmed), norm cues did not moderate the effect, and audience framing produced strong audience main effects but no Status × Audience interaction after correction. These findings challenge static accounts of positivity biases and instead support a view of social evaluation as contextually sensitive, normatively guided, and communicatively strategic.

The implications of this work extend beyond the laboratory. In real-world settings (from obituaries to public memorials, eulogies to social media tributes) evaluations of the dead play a powerful role in shaping moral memory, social identity, and collective understanding. The DPB, as identified here, reveals a structured tendency to elevate the dead in ways that prioritise moral coherence and reputational alignment. This tendency reflects not only cultural taboos or emotional restraint, but deeper psychological mechanisms that regulate how finality, memory, and reverence are socially enacted.

In closing, this thesis contributes both empirical clarity and theoretical depth to our understanding of how death alters person perception. It shows that the dead are judged not just with kindness, but through a selective moral lens—one attuned to the demands of ambiguity, the pull of social norms, and the imperatives of self-presentation. As such, the DPB offers a compelling window into how reverence, morality, and memory intersect in social judgement—and into the enduring human need to speak of the dead not only with caution, but with care.

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Figures and Tables

Table 1

Sample Sizes, Effect Sizes, and p-values for Reviewed Articles

Article	Experiment	*N*	η^2	*p*
Allison & Eylon (2005)		Unreported		< .05 for all, exact figures unreported
Allison et al. (2009)	1	52		Liking < .01, Competence and Inspiration < .05
	2	66		Liking, Competence, and Inspiration < .05
	3	697 articles (290 before death, 407 after)		< .03
	4	113		Moral and Immoral Target < .05
	5	130		Competence DPB < .01, Immoral to Moral < .05, Moral to Immoral < *p* < .05
Drzewiecka & Cwalina (2020)	1	≈ 1000		< .001
	2	465		< .05
Eylon & Allison (2005)	1	87	.23	< .05
	2	70	.33, .27	Competence < .05, Liking < .10
Hayes (2016)	1	76	.156	< .001
	2	101	.044	.037
	3	111	.57	Close Target < .042, Disliked target = .288

Newman (2010)	3	188	Good to Bad = .007, Bad to Good < .001
Sears (1983)	5	117	< .001
	10	182	< .001
Tsutsumida & Shiraiwa (2020)	1	73	> .05
Weiner & Kukla (1970)	1	71	< .001

Table 2

Means (SDs) by condition for all outcomes in Experiment 1 (Alive vs. Dead)

Outcome	Alive *M* (*SD*)	Dead *M* (*SD*)	*p* (η^2)
Liking	4.78 (0.81)	4.87 (0.76)	.435
Competence	4.78 (0.71)	4.80 (0.72)	.838
Morality	4.68 (0.73)	4.64 (0.71)	.695
Respect	4.37 (0.82)	4.37 (0.80)	.984
Composite†	4.66 (0.61) [97]	4.68 (0.64) [102]	.844

Note. *N* = 199 (Alive = 97; Dead = 102). **Boldface** indicates significance after Bonferroni correction. Composite† = unweighted mean of all trait ratings in this experiment. η^2 = partial eta squared (reported for significant effects only).

Table 3

Ancillary Measures in Experiment 1

	Dead		Alive		*p* (η^2)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Ella's welfare (is/was) important.	4.77	.94	5.24	.84	< .001 (.063)
Ella (lives/lived) a good life	5.01	.85	5.14	.71	.261
Ella (deserved/deserves) a good life	5.11	.92	5.26	.77	.204
Ella (is/was) a person of great value	4.78	.95	4.90	.98	.413

Note. *N* = 193.

Table 4

Means (SDs) by condition for all outcomes in Experiment 2 (Alive vs. Dead)

Outcome	Alive *M* (*SD*)	Dead *M* (*SD*)	*p* (η^2)
Liking	4.54 (1.20)	4.89 (1.03)	.043
Competence	5.38 (1.03)	5.50 (0.93)	.617
Morality	5.43 (1.16)	5.56 (1.05)	.614
Respect	4.44 (1.20)	5.04 (0.96)	**< .001 (.067)**
Composite†	4.90 (0.94)	5.23 (0.77)	.021

Note. *N* = 175 (Alive = 91; Dead = 84). **Boldface** indicates significance after Bonferroni correction (α = .01 for four traits + composite). Composite† = unweighted mean of all trait ratings available in this experiment. η^2 = partial eta squared, reported for significant effects only.

Table 5

Ancillary Measures in Experiment 2

	Dead		Alive		*p* (η^2)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Alex/Sam's welfare (is/was) important.	5.82	.99	6.14	1.07	.047 (.023)
Alex/Sam (lives/lived) a good life	5.69	.94	5.40	1.10	.087
Alex/Sam (deserved/deserves) a good life	6.14	1.09	6.34	.89	.066
Alex/Sam (is/was) a person of great value	5.57	1.01	5.43	1.21	.516

Note. *N* = 179.

Table 6

Means (SDs) by condition for all outcomes in Experiment 3 (Alive vs. Dead)

Outcome	Alive M (SD)	Dead M (SD)	p (η^2)
Liking	5.04 (1.17)	5.24 (1.10)	.108
Competence	5.69 (0.89)	5.74 (0.88)	.631
Morality	5.69 (1.04)	5.95 (0.87)	.017
Respect	4.86 (1.18)	5.25 (1.09)	**.002 (.029)**
Composite†	5.32 (0.93)	5.55 (0.81)	.019

Note. *N* = 327 (Alive = 173; Dead = 154; dfs vary slightly across outcomes due to missing data). **Boldface** indicates significance after Bonferroni correction (α = .01 for four traits + composite). Composite† = unweighted mean of all trait ratings available in this experiment. η^2 = partial eta squared, reported for significant effects only.

Table 7

Means (SDs) by condition for all outcomes in Experiment 4 (Alive vs. Dead)

Outcome	Alive M (SD)	Dead M (SD)	p (η^2)
Warmth	4.05 (1.24)	4.41 (0.97)	.044
Liking	4.69 (1.32)	5.18 (0.97)	.009
Competence	5.95 (0.74)	6.08 (0.81)	.273
Morality	**5.54 (1.11)**	**6.07 (0.91)**	**.001 (.063)**
Respect	**4.83 (1.31)**	**5.37 (1.00)**	**.005 (.050)**
Composite†	**5.01 (0.97)**	**5.42 (0.69)**	**.003 (.056)**

Note. *N* = 161 (Alive = 86; Dead = 75). Boldface indicates significance after Bonferroni correction (α = .0083). Composite† = unweighted mean of all trait ratings available in this experiment. η^2 = partial eta squared, reported for significant effects only.

Table 8

Means (SDs) by condition for all outcomes in Experiment 5 (Alive vs. Dead)

Outcome	Alive M (SD)	Dead M (SD)	p (η^2)
Warmth	4.17 (1.14)	4.30 (1.17)	.499
Liking	4.60 (1.27)	5.05 (1.11)	.025
Competence	5.89 (0.78)	6.07 (0.75)	.103
Morality	5.33 (0.86)	5.65 (1.04)	.024
Respect	4.62 (1.15)	5.00 (1.12)	.047
Composite†	4.92 (0.83)	5.21 (0.82)	.029

Note. *N* = 148 (Alive = 70; Dead = 68). **Boldface** indicates significance after Bonferroni correction. Composite† = unweighted mean of all trait ratings available in this experiment. η^2 = partial eta squared, reported for significant effects only.

Table 9

Moderation of the Death-Positivity Bias by Norm Endorsement: Hierarchical Regression Results (Status × Norm)

DV	Moderator	β	ΔR^2	F change	*p*
Warmth	SNES	0.016	.000	0.007	.935
	SNESDEAD	−0.231	.016	2.458	.119
	SNESOVR	−0.175	.005	0.683	.410
Liking	SNES	0.107	.002	0.290	.591
	SNESDEAD	−0.095	.002	0.355	.552
	SNESOVR	−0.022	.000	0.010	.922
Competence	SNES	-0.072	.002	0.318	.574
	SNESDEAD	0.031	.001	0.093	.761
	SNESOVR	−0.025	.000	0.031	.861
Morality	SNES	-0.037	.000	.057	.812
	SNESDEAD	-0.019	.000	.024	.877
	SNESOVR	-0.047	.000	.072	.789
Respect	SNES	.011	.000	.003	.954
	SNESDEAD	-.166	.008	1.261	.263
	SNESOVR	-.122	.002	.343	.559
Overall Composite	SNES	0.005	.000	0.001	.971
	SNESDEAD	-0.096	.005	0.781	.378

DV	Moderator	β	ΔR^2	F change	*p*
	SNESOVR	−0.078	.002	0.262	.610

Note. For each DV, values come from Step 2 of a hierarchical linear regression including Status (0 = alive, 1 = dead), mean-centred Norm endorsement, and their product (Status × Norm). β is the unstandardized coefficient for the interaction term. Interpretation: β > 0 means the dead–alive difference in the DV increases as norm endorsement increases (i.e., the DPB gets stronger at higher endorsement); β < 0 means the dead–alive difference decreases as endorsement increases (i.e., the DPB gets weaker or may reverse). ΔR^2 is the increment in explained variance from adding the interaction at Step 2. F change tests ΔR^2 (df = 1, 144 for all models). p is the p-value for the F-change test. Moderators: SNES = general norms; SNESDEAD = death-specific norms; SNESOVR = overall index. Predictors were mean-centred before computing the interaction.

Table 10

Means (SDs) by condition for all outcomes in Experiment 6 (Alive vs. Dead)

Outcome	Alive *M* (*SD*)	Dead *M* (*SD*)	*p* (η^2)
Warmth	**3.83 (1.13)**	**4.39 (1.14)**	**.002 (.061)**
Liking	**4.41 (1.27)**	**4.91 (1.02)**	**.005 (.051)**
Competence	5.87 (0.82)	6.13 (0.67)	.036
Morality	5.55 (1.00)	5.70 (0.89)	.311
Respect	4.78 (1.33)	5.25 (0.96)	.011
Composite†	**4.89 (0.89)**	**5.28 (0.74)**	**.003 (.057)**

Note. *N* = 155 (Alive = 74; Dead = 81). **Boldface** indicates significance after Bonferroni correction. Composite† = unweighted mean of all trait ratings available in this experiment. η^2 = partial eta squared, reported for significant effects only.

Table 11

Means (SDs) by condition for all outcomes in Experiment 7 (Alive vs. Dead)

Outcome	Alive *M* (*SD*)	Dead *M* (*SD*)	*p* (η^2)
Warmth	**3.78 (1.30)**	**4.26 (1.23)**	**< .001 (.038)**
Liking	4.30 (1.52)	**4.98 (1.29)**	**< .001 (.060)**
Competence	5.77 (0.95)	5.93 (0.87)	.013
Morality	5.27 (1.31)	**5.74 (1.09)**	**< .001 (.039)**
Respect	4.40 (1.46)	**5.22 (1.20)**	**< .001 (.092)**
Composite†	4.71 (1.11)	**5.23 (0.94)**	**< .001 (.067)**

Note. *N* = 719 (Alive = 368; Dead = 351). **Boldface** indicates significance after Bonferroni correction. Composite† = unweighted mean of all trait ratings available in this experiment. η^2 = partial eta squared, reported for significant effects only.

Table 16

Hedges' g Effect Sizes by Dependent Measure and Experiment

Experiment	Warmth	Liking	Competence	Morality	Respect
2	—	0.31*	0.18	0.12	0.55*
3	—	0.18	0.05	0.28*	0.34*
4	0.33*	0.42*	0.18	0.51*	0.46*
5	0.12	0.38*	0.24	0.34*	0.34*
6	0.49*	0.43*	0.34*	0.15	0.41*
7	0.38*	0.49*	0.18*	0.39*	0.61*
Overall	0.35*	0.37*	0.17*	0.32*	0.48*

Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects ($p < .05$).

Table 17

Hedges' g Effect Sizes by Interpersonal Domain and Experiment

Experiment	Sociability	Morality	Competence
2	0.31*	0.39*	0.18
3	0.18	0.35*	0.05
4	0.41*	0.55*	0.18
5	0.28	0.39*	0.24
6	0.50*	0.32*	0.34*
7	0.47*	0.54*	0.18*
Overall	0.36*	0.45*	0.17*

Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects ($p < .05$).

Table 18

Hedges' g Effect Sizes for the Composite Score by Experiment

Experiment	Composite Score (*d*)
2	0.39*
3	0.26*
4	0.49*
5	0.36*
6	0.47*
7	0.51*
Overall	0.42*

Note. Positive values indicate more favourable evaluations of deceased targets. Asterisks denote statistically significant effects ($p < .05$).

APPENDIX A: EXPERIMENT 1

Introduction

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU READ ALL INSTRUCTIONS

In this study, we are interested in thoughts/attitudes that participants have towards other people. To examine this, you will read a brief description of a person and then answer some questions about that person. Before you do this, you'll answer a few demographic questions. For this study, there are no right or wrong answers, and there are no good or bad answers to any questions. This means that you can feel free to respond to all of the questions as honestly and accurately as you can.

Instructions and Vignette

To help us produce descriptions of people for you to read as a part of this study, we asked older participants (age 50+) to describe the life of someone they have known. On the next page you will read one these descriptions. We have changed the name of the person in the description to maintain anonymity.

Read the description carefully. Afterwards, we will ask you for your thoughts on the person described.

Dead

Ella grew up in a village near Luton. Her dad was an accountant or something for Vauxhall, and her mum stayed at home to raise Ella and her younger brother Ethan. Ella went to the local village school and then a 6th form college in Luton after her GCSE's. She finished 6th form with qualifications in Business Studies, Sociology and the last one was like English literature or something. When she was done with college, she went to Uni and studied Business.

After that, she moved to London. She shared a flat with some friends and worked in human resources for a few different places. She moved from company to company a few times. She and her friends really liked nightlife in London. I think she was really into the music scene. She also went on holidays with her friends.

She eventually decided to move to Luton to be closer to her family. She got a job there working in management for some travel company. She met a man called Adam at a company Christmas party. I think he worked in the customer experience or something along those lines. They hit it off pretty well and started dating. Ella eventually moved in with him, eventually they got married and had a couple of kids, Daniel and Megan I think were their names.

Ella became more of an outdoorsy person. She liked going for walks in the local parks and taking trips to Scotland. I think she stayed in good contact with her old friends from young adulthood. And she liked to get Adam out of the house for some live music. She also stayed in close contact with her brother. Sadly, Ella has passed away.

Alive

Ella grew up in a village near Luton. Her dad was an accountant or something for Vauxhall, and her mum stayed at home to raise Ella and her younger brother Ethan. Ella went to a local village school and then a 6th form college in Luton after her GCSE's. She finished 6th form with qualifications in Business Studies, Sociology and the last one was like English literature or something. When she was done with college, she went to Uni and studied Business.

After that, she moved to London. She shared a flat with some friends and worked in human resources for a few different places. She moved from company to company a few times. She and her friends really liked nightlife in London. I think she was really into the music scene. She also went on holidays with her friends.

She eventually decided to move to Luton to be closer to her family. She got a job there working in management for some travel company. She met a man called Adam at a company Christmas party. I think he worked in customer experience or something along those lines. They hit it off pretty well and started dating. Ella eventually moved in with him, eventually they got married and had a couple of kids, Daniel and Megan I think were their names.

Ella is more of an outdoorsy person now. She likes going for walks in the local parks and taking trips to Scotland. I think she stays in good contact with her old friends from young adulthood. And she likes to get Adam out of the house for some live music. She also stays in close contact with her brother.

Vignette Questions

Now that you have read the description, you will answer some questions about Ella. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Moderately disagree
3 = Slightly disagree
4 = Slightly agree
5 = Moderately agree
6 = Strongly agree

Liking (Allison et al., 2009)

1. I view Ella favourably.
2. Ella is likeable.
3. I would want to be Ella's friend.

Competence (Allison et al., 2009)

1. Ella was competent.
2. Ella was effective at her job.
3. Ella (is/was) intelligent.

Morality (Eylon & Allison, 2005)

1. Ella was a moral person.
2. Ella was a good person.
3. Ella was an ethical person.

Respect

1. I respect Ella.
2. I admire Ella.
3. Ella deserves to be revered.
4. People should respect Ella.

Other

1. Ella's welfare (is/was) important.
2. Ella (lives/lived) a good life.
3. Ella (deserved/deserves) a good life.
4. Ella (is/was) a person of great value.

Additional Thoughts

Do you have any additional thoughts about the person from the description?

Do you have any additional thoughts about the description itself?

Manipulation Check

The person in the description was a_____.

Man

Woman

Don't Know

Did the description state that the person was dead?

Yes

No

Don't know

State how old you think the person in the description is. If the person in the description has died, state how old you think the person was when they died.

Demographic Questions

Please indicate your sex: Male Female

Please indicate your age: _____ years

What is the primary language you speak? _____

How would you describe your ethnic background?

a) Black or Black British

- Caribbean
- African
- Any other Black background within (a)

b) White

- British
- Irish

d) Mixed

- White & Black Caribbean
- White & Black African
- White & Asian
- White & Hispanic
- Any other mixed background

e) Other ethnic groups

- American
- Any other White background

c) Asian or Asian British

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Any other Asian background within (c)
- Chinese
- Japanese
- Hispanic
- Any other ethnic group
- Do not state

Probing Questions

In your own words, what was the purpose of this study?

Were you alone when completing this study?

Yes

No

Were you listening to, or could you hear, any music when you were completing this study?

Yes

No

Did you have the television on while you were completing this study?

Yes

No

Were you distracted in any way while completing this study?

Yes

No

If yes.

Please state the distraction(s) you experienced.

Mood Repair Task

Please list two positive qualities about yourself.

Please rate how much you like the following picture using the scale provided.

1 = not very much

5 = a lot

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

APPENDIX B: EXPERIMENT 2

Instructions and Vignettes

Experimental Conditions (Dead vs. Alive Vignette)

Experimental (Dead) Condition Instructions

For the first task, you will read a description of another person. To attain descriptions of other people for participants to read in the study, we asked participants (all older than 50) in a previous study to describe someone they have known in a few paragraphs.

You will read one of the descriptions. Afterwards, we will ask you for your thoughts on the person described. We have changed the name of the person in the description to maintain anonymity.

Read the description carefully.

Dead Vignette Alex Male

I guess I'll describe Alex, who has passed away.

Alex had his own ideas about how people should live. He felt that the world could be a much better place to live if everyone practiced transcendental meditation. He envisioned a world without hunger, poverty, or crime. He believed that once such a world is established, all political leaders could then step down from their posts, and all people, regardless of age, race, or nationality, would live in harmony together.

A lot of people enjoyed Alex's humour. He was in the habit of making jokes out of the blue. Often times in parties his humour was quick to address the faults that people have or the mistakes they had made.

Alex recently started making attempts to keep up to date with cultural knowledge. He read a book about Europe, sat in a music appreciation workshop, and ate at fashionable ethnic restaurants. When being with friends, he often talked at length about foreign culture and art.

In order to improve his life, Alex tried to save money. He used coupons, bought things on sale, and avoided donating money to charity or lending money to friends.

Dead Vignette Alex Female

I guess I'll describe Alex, who has passed away.

Alex had her own ideas about how people should live. She felt that the world could be a much better place to live if everyone practiced transcendental meditation. She envisioned a world without hunger, poverty, or crime. She believed that once such a world is established, all political leaders could then step down from their posts, and all people, regardless of age, race, or nationality, would live in harmony together.

A lot of people enjoyed Alex's humour. She was in the habit of making jokes out of the blue. Often times in parties her humour was quick to address the faults that people have or the mistakes they had made.

Alex recently started making attempts to keep up to date with cultural knowledge. She read a book about Europe, sat in a music appreciation workshop, and ate at fashionable ethnic restaurants. When being with friends, she often talked at length about foreign culture and art.

In order to improve her life, Alex tried to save money. She used coupons, bought things on sale, and avoided donating money to charity or lending money to friends.

Dead Vignette Sam Male

I guess I'll describe Sam, who has passed away.

Sam spent a great amount of his time in search of what he liked to call excitement. He climbed Mt. McKinley, did some skydiving, shot the Colorado rapids in a Kayak, drove in a demolition derby, and piloted a jet-powered boat without knowing much about boats. Despite having a go at all these extreme sports, Sam has never been seriously injured during them.

Sam had his own standards of behaving. As a student he would tell teachers if he saw fellow classmates break school rules, like cheating on tests. In fact, he claimed to his friends that never once in his life he had thought about cheating.

Other than business engagements Sam's contacts with people were surprisingly limited. He felt he didn't really need to rely on anyone.

Once Sam made up his mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how long it might take or how difficult the going might get. Only rarely did he change his mind even when it might be better if he had.

Dead Vignette Sam Female

I guess I'll describe Sam, who has passed away.

Sam spent a great amount of her time in search of what she liked to call excitement. She climbed Mt. McKinley, did some skydiving, shot the Colorado rapids in a Kayak, drove in a demolition derby, and piloted a jet-powered boat without knowing much about boats. Despite having a go at all these extreme sports, Sam has never been seriously injured during them.

Sam had her own standards of behaving. As a student he would tell teachers if he saw fellow classmates break school rules, like cheating on tests. In fact, he claimed to his friends that never once in his life he had thought about cheating.

Other than business engagements Sam's contacts with people were surprisingly limited. She felt she didn't really need to rely on anyone.

Once Sam made up her mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how long it might take or how difficult the going might get. Only rarely did she change her mind even when it might be better if she had.

Control (Alive) Condition Instructions

For the first task, you will read a description of another person. To attain descriptions of other people for participants to read in the study, we asked participants (all older than 50) in a previous study to describe someone they know in a few paragraphs.

You will read one of the descriptions. Afterwards, we will ask you for your thoughts on the person described. We have changed the name of the person in the description to maintain anonymity.

Read the description carefully.

Alive Vignette Alex Male

I guess I'll describe Alex

Alex has his own ideas about how people should live. He feels that the world can be a much better place to live if everyone practices transcendental meditation. He envisions a world without hunger, poverty, or crime. He believes that once such a world is established, all

political leaders can then step down from their posts, and all people, regardless of age, race, or nationality, will live in harmony together.

A lot of people enjoy Alex's humour. He is in the habit of making jokes out of the blue. Often times in parties his humour is quick to address the faults that people have or the mistakes they have made.

Alex recently started making attempts to keep up to date with cultural knowledge. He read a book about Europe, sat in a music appreciation workshop, and eats at fashionable ethnic restaurants. When being with friends, he often talks at length about foreign culture and art.

In order to improve his life, Alex tries to save money. He uses coupons, buys things on sale, and avoids donating money to charity or lending money to friends.

Alive Vignette Alex Female

I guess I'll describe Alex

Alex has her own ideas about how people should live. She feels that the world can be a much better place to live if everyone practices transcendental meditation. She envisions a world without hunger, poverty, or crime. She believes that once such a world is established, all political leaders can then step down from their posts, and all people, regardless of age, race, or nationality, will live in harmony together.

A lot of people enjoy Alex's humour. She is in the habit of making jokes out of the blue. Often times in parties her humour is quick to address the faults that people have or the mistakes they have made.

Alex recently started making attempts to keep up to date with cultural knowledge. She read a book about Europe, sat in a music appreciation workshop, and eats at fashionable ethnic restaurants. When being with friends, she often talks at length about foreign culture and art.

In order to improve her life, Alex tries to save money. She uses coupons, buys things on sale, and avoids donating money to charity or lending money to friends.

Alive Vignette Sam Male

I guess I'll describe Sam

Sam spends a great amount of his time in search of what he likes to call excitement. He has already climbed Mt. McKinley, done some skydiving, shot the Colorado rapids in a Kayak, driven in a demolition derby, and piloted a jet-powered boat without knowing much about boats. Despite having a go at all these extreme sports, Sam has never been seriously injured during them.

Sam has his own standards of behaving. As a student he would tell teachers if he saw fellow classmates break school rules, like cheating on tests. In fact, he claimed to his friends that never once in his life he had thought about cheating.

Other than business engagements Sam's contacts with people are surprisingly limited. He feels he doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

Once Sam makes up his mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how long it might take or how difficult the going might get. Only rarely does he change his mind even when it might be better if he had.

Alive Vignette Sam Female

I guess I'll describe Sam

Sam spends a great amount of her time in search of what she likes to call excitement. She has already climbed Mt. McKinley, done some skydiving, shot the Colorado rapids in a Kayak, driven in a demolition derby, and piloted a jet-powered boat without knowing much about boats. Despite having a go at all these extreme sports, Sam has never been seriously injured during them.

Sam has her own standards of behaving. As a student she would tell teachers if she saw fellow classmates break school rules, like cheating on tests. In fact, she claimed to her friends that never once in her life she had thought about cheating.

Other than business engagements Sam's contacts with people are surprisingly limited. She feels she doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

Once Sam makes up her mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how long it might take or how difficult the going might get. Only rarely does she change her mind even when it might be better if she had.

Vignette Questions

Now that you have read the description, you will answer some questions about **NAME**. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Moderately disagree

3 = Slightly disagree

4 = Neither agree nor disagree

5 = Slightly agree

6 = Moderately agree

7 = Strongly agree

Liking (Allison et al., 2009)

1. I view **NAME** favourably.
2. **NAME** (is/was) likeable.
3. I would (have) want(ed) to be **NAME**'s friend.

Competence (Allison et al., 2009)

1. **NAME** (is/was) a competent person.
2. I imagine **NAME** (is/was) effective at their job.
3. **NAME** (is/was) intelligent.

Morality (Eylon & Allison, 2005)

1. **NAME** (is/was) a moral person.
2. **NAME** (is/was) a good person.
3. **NAME** (is/was) an ethical person.

Respect

1. I respect **NAME**.
2. I admire **NAME**.
3. **NAME** deserves to be revered.
4. People should respect **NAME**.

Other

1. **NAME**'s welfare (is/was) important.
2. **NAME** (lives/lived) a good life.
3. **NAME** (deserves/deserved) a good life.
4. **NAME** (is/was) a person of great value.

Additional Thoughts

Do you have any additional thoughts about the person from the description?

Do you have any additional thoughts about the description itself?

Manipulation Check

The person in the description was _____.

Alive

Dead

Don't Know

State how old you think the person in the description is. If the person in the description has died, state how old you think the person was when they died. ____

Demographic Questions

How would you describe your ethnic background?

a) Black or Black British

- Caribbean
- African
- Any other Black background within (a)

b) White

- British
- Irish
- American
- Any other White background

c) Asian or Asian British

- Indian
- Pakistani

d) Mixed

- White & Black Caribbean
- White & Black African
- White & Asian
- White & Hispanic
- Any other mixed background

e) Other ethnic groups

- Chinese
- Japanese
- Hispanic
- Any other ethnic group
- Do not state

Bangladeshi

Any other Asian background within (c)

Please indicate your sex: Male Female

Please indicate your age: _____ years

What is the primary langue you speak? _____

Which of the following colours do you like the best?

Red

Green

Blue

Yellow

Orange

Brown

Purple

Which of the following seasons do you like best?

Winter

Spring

Summer

Autumn

Which of the following foods do you like best?

Lasagne

Burger

Sausage

Chicken Curry

I don't like any of the above

Which of the following snacks do you like best?

Crisps

Digestives

Jaffa Cakes

I don’t like any of the above

Where did you go on your favourite holiday?

Probing Questions

In your own words, what was the purpose of this study?

It is vital that we only include responses from people who devoted their full attention to this study. Otherwise, years of effort (the researchers' and the time of other participants) could be wasted. You will receive compensation no matter how you answer this question. In your honest opinion, should we use your data in our analyses?

Yes
No

Does your gender identity match your sex assigned at birth (are you cisgender)?

Yes
No

Mood Repair Task

See Appendix A: Experiment 1, Mood Repair Task

APPENDIX C: EXPERIMENT 3

Instructions and Vignettes

Experimental Conditions (Dead vs. Alive Vignette)

Instructions

On the next page, you will read a description of another person.
This person is from the United Kingdom/Andorra. We obtained this person's description from a previous study in which we asked participants from the United Kingdom/Andorra (all older than 50) to list some characteristics or traits of someone they have known.
Andorran participants in our previous study left descriptions in Andorran Catalan or Spanish, which have been translated to English for this study.
After you read the description, you will answer some questions about the person depicted in it.

[Dead Vignette] Sam/Angel [Male]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Angel, who has now passed away.

Sam/Angel spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he called excitement anyway. He climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he was never seriously injured.

Sam/Angel had his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once told me that he had never cheated and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he saw at work, Sam's/Angel's contact with people was kind of limited. He seemed like he didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Angel made up his mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. He rarely changed his mind, even if he should have.

[Dead Vignette] Sam/Angel [Female]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Angel, who has passed away.

Sam/Angel spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what she called excitement anyway. She climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a

motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, she was never seriously injured.

Sam/Angel had her own standards of behaving. In school she would tell teachers if she saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. She once told me that she had never cheated and that she thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people she saw at work, Sam's/Angel's contact with people was kind of limited. She seemed like she didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Angel made up her mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. She rarely changed her mind, even if she should have.

[Alive Vignette] Sam/Angel [Male]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Angel.

Sam/Angel spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he calls excitement anyway. He climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he has never been seriously injured.

Sam/Angel has his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once told me that he had never cheated and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he sees at work, Sam's/Angel's contact with people is kind of limited. He seems like he doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Angel makes up his mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. He rarely changes his mind, even if he should.

[Alive Vignette] Sam/Angel [Female]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Angel.

Sam/Angel spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what she calls excitement anyway. She climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, she has never been seriously injured.

Sam/Angel has her own standards of behaving. In school she would tell teachers if she saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. She once told me that she had never cheated and that she thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people she sees at work, Sam's/Angel's contact with people is kind of limited. She seems like she doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Angel makes up her mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. She rarely changes her mind, even if she should.

Vignette Questions

We would now like you to answer some questions about **NAME**. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Moderately disagree
3 = Slightly disagree
4 = Neither agree nor disagree
5 = Slightly agree
6 = Moderately agree
7 = Strongly agree

Liking (Allison et al., 2009)

1. I view **NAME** favourably.
2. **NAME** (is/was) likeable.
3. I would (have) want(ed) to be **NAME**'s friend.

Competence (Allison et al., 2009)

1. **NAME** (is/was) a competent person.
2. I imagine **NAME** (is/was) effective at their job.
3. **NAME** (is/was) intelligent.

Morality (Eylon & Allison, 2005)

1. **NAME** (is/was) a moral person.
2. **NAME** (is/was) a good person.
3. **NAME** (is/was) an ethical person.

Respect

1. I respect **NAME**.
2. I admire **NAME**.
3. **NAME** deserves to be revered.
4. People should respect **NAME**.

Additional Thoughts

Do you have any additional thoughts about the person from the description?

Do you have any additional thoughts about the description itself?

Manipulation Check

What country was the person in the description from?

France

United Kingdom

Andorra

Italy

The person in the description was _____.

Alive

Dead

Don't Know

If participants select "Dead", they will see...

Did the description state how the person died?

Yes

No

If participants select "Yes", they will see...

How did the person die? _____

State how old you think the person in the description is. If the person in the description has died, state how old you think the person was when they died. ____

Demographic Questions

See Appendix B: Experiment 2, Demographic Questions

Probing Questions

See Appendix B: Experiment 2, Probing Questions

Mood Repair Task

See Appendix A: Experiment 1, Mood Repair Task

APPENDIX D: EXPERIMENT 4

Introduction

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU READ ALL INSTRUCTIONS

In this study, we are interested in thoughts and attitudes that participants have towards other people. After responding to a few demographic questions, you will read a brief description of a person and be asked to answer questions about that person.

Demographic Questions

How would you describe your ethnic background?

a) Black or Black British

- Caribbean
- African
- Any other Black background within (a)

b) White

- British
- Irish
- American
- Any other White background

c) Asian or Asian British

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Any other Asian background within (c)

d) Mixed

- White & Black Caribbean
- White & Black African
- White & Asian
- White & Hispanic
- Any other mixed background

e) Other ethnic groups

- Chinese
- Japanese
- Hispanic
- Any other ethnic group
- Do not state

Please indicate your gender: Male Female

Please indicate your age: _____ years

What is the primary langue you speak? _____

Instructions and Vignettes

Experimental Conditions (Dead vs. Alive Vignette)

Instructions

On the next page, you will read a description of another person.
This person is from [the United Kingdom] / [Russia]. We obtained this person's description from a previous study in which we asked participants (all older than 50) to list some characteristics or traits of someone they have known.

Russian participants in our previous study left descriptions in Russian Cyrillic, which have been translated to English for this study.

After you read the description, you will answer some questions about the person depicted in it.

[Alive Vignette] [Sam] / [Alexei] [Male]

I guess I'll describe [Sam] / [Alexei].

Sam/Alexei spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he calls excitement anyway. He climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he has never been seriously injured.

[Sam] / [Alexei] has his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once told me that he had never cheated and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he sees at work, [Sam's] / [Alexei's] contact with people is kind of limited. He seems like he doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When [Sam] / [Alexei] makes up his mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. He rarely changes his mind, even if he should.

[Alive Vignette] [Sam] / [Alexina] [Female]

I guess I'll describe [Sam] / [Alexina].

[Sam] / [Alexina] spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what she calls excitement anyway. She climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through

rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, she has never been seriously injured.

[Sam] / [Alexina] has her own standards of behaving. In school she would tell teachers if she saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. She once told me that she had never cheated and that she thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people she sees at work, [Sam's] / [Alexina's] contact with people is kind of limited. She seems like she doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When [Sam] / [Alexina] makes up her mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. She rarely changes her mind, even if she should.

[Dead Vignette] [Sam] / [Alexei] [Male]

I guess I'll describe [Sam] / [Alexei], who has now passed away.

[Sam] / [Alexei] spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he called excitement anyway. He climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he was never seriously injured.

[Sam] / [Alexei] had his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once told me that he had never cheated and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he saw at work, [Sam's] / [Alexei's] contact with people was kind of limited. He seemed like he didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When [Sam] / [Alexei] made up his mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. He rarely changed his mind, even if he should have.

[Dead Vignette] [Sam] / [Alexina] [Female]

I guess I'll describe [Sam] / [Alexina], who has passed away.

[Sam] / [Alexina] spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what she called excitement anyway. She climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, she was never seriously injured.

[Sam] / [Alexina] had her own standards of behaving. In school she would tell teachers if she saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. She once told me that she had never cheated and that she thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people she saw at work, [Sam's] / [Alexina's] contact with people was kind of limited. She seemed like she didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When [Sam] / [Alexina] made up her mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. She rarely changed her mind, even if she should have.

Vignette Questions

Participants will see the Warmth, Competence and Morality scales in a random order. The Liking scale will always appear last.

We would now like you to answer some questions about **NAME**. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Moderately disagree
3 = Slightly disagree
4 = Neither agree nor disagree
5 = Slightly agree
6 = Moderately agree
7 = Strongly agree

STEM: NAME (is/was)...

Warmth *Fiske et al. (2002)*

1. a warm person.
2. a tolerant person.
3. a good-natured person.

Competence *Abele & Wojciszke (2014), Allison et al. (2009)*

1. a competent person.
2. an independent person.
3. an intelligent person.

Morality *Eylon & Allison (2005)*

1. a moral person.
2. a good person.
3. an ethical person.

Respect

1. I respect **NAME**.
2. I admire **NAME**.
3. **NAME** deserves to be revered.
4. People should respect **NAME**.

Liking *Allison et al. (2009)*

1. I view **NAME** favourably.
2. **NAME** (is/was) likeable.
3. I would (have) want(ed) to be **NAME**'s friend.

Manipulation Check

What country was the person in the description from?

France

United Kingdom

Andorra

Russia

The person in the description was _____.

Alive

Dead

Don't Know

If participants select "Dead", they will see...

Did the description state how the person died?

Yes

No

If participants select "Yes", they will see...

How did the person die? _____

State how old you think the person in the description is. If the person in the description has died, state how old you think the person was when they died. ____

Probing Questions

In your own words, what was the purpose of this study?

It is vital that we only include responses from people who devoted their full attention to this study. Otherwise, years of effort (the researchers' and the time of other participants) could be wasted. You will receive compensation no matter how you answer this question. In your honest opinion, should we use your data in our analyses?
Yes
No

Mood Repair Task
See Appendix A: Experiment 1, Mood Repair Task

APPENDIX E: EXPERIMENT 5

Introduction

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU READ ALL INSTRUCTIONS

In this study, we are interested in thoughts and attitudes that one has towards other people. After responding to a few demographic questions, you will read a brief description of a person and be asked to answer questions about that person.

Demographic Questions

See Appendix D: Experiment 4, Demographic Questions

Instructions and Vignettes

Experimental Conditions (Dead vs. Alive Vignette)

Instructions

On the next page, you will read a description of another person. We obtained this person's description from a previous study in which we asked first-year University of Southampton students to list some characteristics or traits of someone they have known.

After you read the description, you will answer some questions about the person depicted in the description.

[Dead Vignette] Sam/Alex [Female]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Alex, who has passed away.

Sam/Alex spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what she called excitement anyway. She climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, she was never seriously injured.

Sam/Alex had her own standards of behaving. In school she would tell teachers if she saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. She once told me that she had never cheated and that she thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people she saw at work, Sam's/Alex's contact with people was kind of limited. She seemed like she didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Alex made up her mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. She rarely changed her mind, even if she should have.

[Dead Vignette] Sam/Alex [Non-binary]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Alex, who has passed away.

Sam/Alex spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what they called excitement anyway. They climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, they were never seriously injured.

Sam/Alex had their own standards of behaving. In school they would tell teachers if they saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. They once told me that they had never cheated and that they thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people they saw at work, Sam's/Alex's contact with people was kind of limited. They seemed like they didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Alex made up their mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. They rarely changed their mind, even if they should have.

[Alive Vignette] Sam/Alex [Male]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Alex.

Sam/Alex spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he calls excitement anyway. He climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he has never been seriously injured.

Sam/Alex has his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once told me that he had never cheated and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he sees at work, Sam's/Alex's contact with people is kind of limited. He seems like he doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Alex makes up his mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. He rarely changes his mind, even if he should.

[Alive Vignette] Sam/Alex [Female]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Alex.

Sam/Alex spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what she calls excitement anyway. She climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, she has never been seriously injured.

Sam/Alex has her own standards of behaving. In school she would tell teachers if she saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. She once told me that she had never cheated and that she thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people she sees at work, Sam's/Alex's contact with people is kind of limited. She seems like she doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Alex makes up her mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. She rarely changes her mind, even if she should.

[Alive Vignette] Sam/Alex [Non-binary]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Alex.

Sam/Alex spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what they call excitement anyway. They climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, they have never been seriously injured.

Sam/Alex has their own standards of behaving. In school they would tell teachers if they saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. They once told me that they had never cheated and that they thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people they see at work, Sam's/Alex's contact with people is kind of limited. They seems like they doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Alex makes up their mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. They rarely change their mind, even if they should.

[Dead Vignette] Sam/Alex [Male]

I guess I'll describe Sam/Alex, who has now passed away.

Sam/Alex spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he called excitement anyway. He climbed Snowdon, went skydiving a few times, Kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he was never seriously injured.

Sam/Alex had his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once told me that he had never cheated and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he saw at work, Sam's/Alex's contact with people was kind of limited. He seemed like he didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Sam/Alex made up his mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. He rarely changed his mind, even if he should have.

Moderator

The Norm Espousal Scale (Bizer et al., 2014)

Please rate the extent to which these items are characteristic of you or what feel you believe at this moment.

1 = Very uncharacteristic
2 = Moderately uncharacteristic
3 = Somewhat uncharacteristic
4 = Neither uncharacteristic nor characteristic
5 = Somewhat characteristic
6 = Moderately characteristic
7 = Very characteristic

1. There is a correct way to behave in every situation.
2. If more people followed society's rules, the world would be a better place.
3. People need to follow life's unwritten rules every bit as strictly as they follow the written rules.
4. There are lots of vital customs that people should follow as members of society.
5. I am at ease only when everyone around me is adhering to society's norms.

6. I always do my best to follow society's rules.
7. We should treat dead people with more respect than alive people.
8. We should be kinder to dead people than alive people.
9. We should not criticise dead people, although we should feel free to criticise alive people.
10. We should not badmouth dead people, although we may need to do so sometimes with alive people.
11. Dead people are untouchable; alive people are another story.
12. It's bad form to judge dead people, but it's acceptable to judge alive people.

Vignette Questions

See Appendix D: Experiment 4, Vignette Questions

Manipulation Check

The person in the description was _____.

Alive

Dead

Don't Know

If participants select "Dead", they will see...

Did the description state how the person died?

Yes

No

If participants select "Yes", they will see...

How did the person die? _____

State how old you think the person in the description is. If the person in the description has died, state how old you think the person was when they died. ____

Probing Questions

See Appendix D: Experiment 4, Probing Questions

Mood Repair Task

See Appendix A: Experiment 1, Mood Repair Task

Mediation Analysis

To examine whether the DPB was mediated by endorsement of social norms, I regressed the Norm Espousal Scale, and each of its subscales, on target (dead vs. alive). These regressions tested whether participants in the dead condition reported stronger norm endorsement than those in the alive condition, a necessary condition for mediation.

There was no significant effect of target on overall norm endorsement (norm espousal scale total score), $F(1, 146) = 0.13$, $p = .721$, $R^2 = .001$. Participants in the dead condition ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.05$) and those in the alive condition ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.98$) did not significantly differ in their overall norm endorsement, $B = -0.06$, SE = 0.17, $t = -0.36$, $p = .721$. Similarly, there was no significant effect of target on endorsement of death-specific norms, $F(1, 146) = 0.01$, $p = .951$, $R^2 < .001$. Participants in the dead condition ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.27$) and those in the alive condition ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.25$) did not significantly differ in death-specific norm endorsement, $B = -0.01$, SE = 0.21, $t = -0.06$, $p = .951$. Finaly, the same null effect emerged for general social norms, $F(1, 146) = 0.04$, $p = .835$, $R^2 < .001$. Participants in the dead condition ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.94$) and those in the alive condition ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.87$) did not significantly differ in general norm endorsement, $B = -0.03$, SE = 0.15, $t = -0.21$, $p = .835$.

Taken together, these results provide no evidence that target influenced endorsement of either general or death-specific norms. Accordingly, the precondition for mediation was not met. Norm endorsement did not explain the DPB.

APPENDIX F: EXPERIMENT 6

Introduction

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU READ ALL INSTRUCTIONS

In this study, we are interested in thoughts and attitudes that participants have towards other people. After responding to a few demographic questions, you will read a brief description of a person and be asked to answer questions about that person.

Demographic Questions

See Appendix D: Experiment 4, Demographic Questions

Instructions and Vignettes

Experimental (Criticise Norm) vs. Control (Support Norm)

[Criticise Norm]

Showing respect for the dead is one of humanity's longest held social norms. When we talk about the dead it is almost always in positive manner, and the dead person's character flaws or misgivings are politely ignored. The term 'eulogy' even comes from the Greek word 'eulogia,' meaning "a blessing."

This norm, however, is not that widespread anymore. It has been eroded, in part, due to online communication or social media. People now prefer to talk candidly about the deceased, as dishonestly whitewashing their legacy creates problems: it prevents lessons being learned from a negative past and spits in the face of the living who may have been hurt by the deceased action's. Indeed, experimental social psychologists have demonstrated that a new norm has been established: being candid about the deceased. This new norm has substantial benefits. First, the norm liberates the individual to tell the truth. Second, the norm promotes cohesiveness in the larger social networks enabled by the internet: people perceive those not blindly following the outdated 'respect the dead' dictum as being more authentic and trustworthy.

[Enforce Norm]

Showing respect for the dead is one of humanity's longest held social norms. When we talk about the dead it is almost always in positive manner, and the dead person's character

flaws or misgivings are politely ignored. The term ‘eulogy’ even comes from the Greek word ‘eulogia’, meaning “a blessing.”

Experimental social psychologists have identified several reasons for why this norm is so widespread. *Firstly*, respecting the dead is seen as an act of compassion that acknowledges the vulnerability of humanity and the grief of mourners. *Secondly*, the dead are not here to defend themselves. In modern legal systems, anyone accused of wrongdoing is entitled to a defence. Similarly, it is seen as unfair to speak ill of someone without them being present to give their account. As the dead cannot defend themselves, speaking ill of them violates a sense of justice ingrained in us. *Finally*, people tend to view those who speak ill of the dead as competitively motivated: they are trashing someone’s reputation to enhance their own by comparison. So, people think of them as inauthentic and untrustworthy.

Experimental Conditions (Dead vs. Alive Vignette)

Instructions

On the next page, you will read a description of another person. We obtained this person’s description from a previous study in which we asked participants (all older than 50) to list some characteristics or traits of someone they have known.

After you read the description, you will answer some questions about the person depicted in the description.

[Dead Vignette] [Sam] / [Alex] [Male]

I guess I’ll describe [Sam] / [Alex], who has now passed away.

[Sam] / [Alex] spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he called excitement anyway. He climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he was never seriously injured.

[Sam] / [Alex] had his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once told me that he had never cheated and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he saw at work, [Sam’s] / [Alex’s] contact with people was kind of limited. He seemed like he didn’t really need to rely on anyone.

When [Sam] / [Alex] made up his mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. He rarely changed his mind, even if he should have.

[Dead Vignette] [Sam] / [Alex] [Female]

I guess I'll describe [Sam] / [Alex], who has passed away.

[Sam] / [Alex] spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what she called excitement anyway. She climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, she was never seriously injured.

[Sam] / [Alex] had her own standards of behaving. In school she would tell teachers if she saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. She once told me that she had never cheated and that she thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people she saw at work, [Sam's] / [Alex'] contact with people was kind of limited. She seemed like she didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When [Sam] / [Alex] made up her mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. She rarely changed her mind, even if she should have.

[Alive Vignette] [Sam] / [Alex] [Male]

I guess I'll describe [Sam] / [Alex].

[Sam]/[Alex] spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he calls excitement anyway. He climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he has never been seriously injured.

[Sam] / [Alex] has his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once told me that he had never cheated and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he sees at work, [Sam's] / [Alex's] contact with people is kind of limited. He seems like he doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When [Sam] / [Alexei] makes up his mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. He rarely changes his mind, even if he should.

[Alive Vignette] [Sam] / [Alex] [Female]

I guess I'll describe [Sam] / [Alex].

[Sam] / [Alex] spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what she calls excitement anyway. She climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, she has never been seriously injured.

[Sam] / [Alex] has her own standards of behaving. In school she would tell teachers if she saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. She once told me that she had never cheated and that she thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people she sees at work, [Sam's] / [Alex'] contact with people is kind of limited. She seems like she doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When [Sam] / [Alex] makes up her mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. She rarely changes her mind, even if she should.

Vignette Questions

See Appendix E: Experiment 5, Vignette Questions

Manipulation Check

The person in the description was _____.

A Man

A Woman

Non-binary

Don't Know

The person in the description was _____.

Alive

Dead

Don't Know

If participants select "Dead", they will see...

Did the description state how the person died?

Yes

No

If participants select “Yes”, they will see…

How did the person die? _____

State how old you think the person in the description is. If the person in the description has died, state how old you think the person was when they died. ____

Probing Questions

See Appendix D: Experiment 4, Probing Questions

APPENDIX G: EXPERIMENT 7

Introduction

PLEASE READ ALL INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY

In this study, we are interested in thoughts and attitudes that one has towards other persons. After responding to a few demographic questions, you will read a brief description of a person and be asked to answer questions about them.

Instructions and Vignettes

DEAD / LIKE

On the next page, you'll read the description of another person, Alex (not his real name). We need to tell you in advance that Alex has recently passed away.

You'll be asked to:

1. Form an impression of Alex.
2. Describe Alex to people who knew and liked him.
3. Rate Alex on various traits.

(As a reminder, Alex recently passed away.)

Alex spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he called excitement anyway. He climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he was never seriously injured.

Alex had his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once claimed that he had never cheated on tests and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he saw at work, Alex's contact with people was kind of limited. He seemed like he didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Alex made up his mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. He rarely changed his mind, even if he should have.

Please take a few moments to describe Alex for those who knew and appreciated him. That is, your words will be shared with others who liked him and cared about him.

Start writing your description of Alex now:

_____

DEAD / DISLIKE

On the next page, you'll read the description of another person, Alex (not his real name). We need to tell you in advance that Alex has recently passed away.

You'll be asked to:

1. Form an impression of Alex.
2. Describe Alex to people who knew and disliked him.
3. Rate Alex on various traits.

(As a reminder, Alex recently passed away.)
Alex spent a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he called excitement anyway. He climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he was never seriously injured.

Alex had his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once claimed that he had never cheated on tests and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he saw at work, Alex's contact with people was kind of limited. He seemed like he didn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Alex made up his mind to do something it was as good as done no matter how difficult it was or how long it might take. He rarely changed his mind, even if he should have.

Please take a few moments to describe Alex for those who knew and despised him. That is, your words will be shared with others who disliked him and didn't care about him.

Start writing your description of Alex now:

_____

ALIVE / LIKE

On the next page, you'll read the description of another person, Alex (not his real name).

You'll be asked to:

1. Form an impression of Alex.
2. Describe Alex to people who know and like him.
3. Rate Alex on various traits.

Alex spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he calls excitement anyway. He climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he has never been seriously injured.

Alex has his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once claimed that he had never cheated on tests and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he sees at work, Alex's contact with people is kind of limited. He seems like he doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Alex makes up his mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. He rarely changes his mind, even if he should.

Please take a few minutes to describe Alex to people who know and appreciate him. That is, your words will be shared with others who like him and care about him.

Start writing your description of Alex now:

_____

ALIVE / DISLIKE

On the next page, you'll read the description of another person, Alex (not his real name).

You'll be asked to:

1. Form an impression of Alex.
2. Describe Alex to people who know and dislike him.
3. Rate Alex on various traits.

Alex spends a lot of time searching for excitement, or what he calls excitement anyway. He climbed mountains, went skydiving a few times, kayaked through rapids, did a motocross competition, and drove a speedboat without really knowing that much about boats. Despite having a go at all these things, he has never been seriously injured.

Alex has his own standards of behaving. In school he would tell teachers if he saw people breaking rules, like cheating on tests. He once claimed that he had never cheated on tests and that he thought it was unacceptable when others did it.

Other than people he sees at work, Alex's contact with people is kind of limited. He seems like he doesn't really need to rely on anyone.

When Alex makes up his mind to do something it is as good as done no matter how difficult it is or how long it might take. He rarely changes his mind, even if he should.

Please take a few minutes to describe Alex to people who know and despise him. That is, your words will be shared with others who dislike him and don't care about him.

Start writing your description of Alex now:

_____

Vignette Questions

See Appendix D: Experiment 4, Vignette Questions

Manipulation Check

You described Alex for those who knew him well. How did those people feel about Alex?

They liked him

They disliked him

Alex is …

Alive

Dead

Demographic Questions

See Appendix D: Experiment 4, Demographic Questions

Mood Repair Task

See Appendix A: Experiment 1, Mood Repair Task