

INTERPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY IN THE AFTERLIFE: IMAGINING WHAT DEAD PEOPLE WOULD THINK

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Background: Although many biological functions end with death, social psychology does not. The living and the dead continue to interact and influence each other in several of the same ways in which the living interact with each other, and this continued influence between the living and the dead is governed by the same social-psychological principles that guide interactions between the living. For instance, the way people think of others (e.g., the thoughts and feelings they infer other people might have) is not stable, but rather malleable and dependent on their own states. We predict that the same might be true of how people think of the dead: What they imagine the dead would think and feel about something is influenced by how they themselves think and feel about it.

Aims: A well-established psychological phenomenon in social psychology is projection: People have a tendency to assume that others share their views and attitudes. In the present study, we attempt to establish that people also project their attitudes when inferring those of dead people.

Methods: In two studies, participants first completed an experimental task that was designed to make them think positively or negatively about a novel topic (different topics were used across studies). They then expressed their attitude towards that topic. Finally, they were asked to estimate the attitude that a dead person (who they knew) might have about that topic.

Results: The attitudes expressed by participants correlated with the attitudes they inferred for dead people. That is, people tended to think that the dead would share their (positive or negative – depending on experimental condition) attitude.

Conclusions: Thus, we found evidence for attitudinal projection towards dead people.

Keywords: Life after death, Social psychology, Social projection, Attitudes

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