A study of the death positivity bias in the evaluation of a painting

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絵画評価における Death Positivity Bias の検討

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要約

死者は生者よりもポジティブに評価される傾向がある。death positivity bias と呼ばれるこの現象は、シナリオ実験と実際の雑誌記事の両方で確認されている。絵画の世界でも同様に、ゴッホやモジリアーニなど、死後になって評価が高まる画家の存在が知られている。死後に評価が向上する現象は、ゴッホのように傑出した才能をもつ特別な画家以外でも生起するのだろうか。つまり、death positivity bias は絵画全般において生起するのだろうか。この点を検証することが本研究の第一の目的であった。第二の目的は、上記で death positivity bias が確認されたとして、それが画家の死による効果なのか、あるいは作品の希少性の高まりによる効果なのかを検討することであった。筆者らはシナリオ実験を行い、架空の無名画家の死亡条件と存命条件、さらに活動停止条件で、絵画および画家への評価を比較した。分散分析の結果、death positivity bias は確認されなかった。この結果は、先行研究がターゲットとした実業家や一般人などとは異なり、画家は死による恩恵を受けにくいことを示している。death positivity bias の発生境界条件や今後の研究の方向性が議論された。

Key words

death positivity bias, death effect, reverence for the dead, art, painting

1. Introduction

1.1 The death positivity bias

The dead are likely to be evaluated more positively than the living. When talking about dead people, we tend to focus on their good points rather than bad points (Fujimura, 2011; Speech Kobo, 2006). The prototypical example of this is a message of condolence. Analyzing condolences for famous people, Soeda (2003) pointed out that messages of condolence have generally contained praise and appreciation for the dead.

The death positivity bias means that the dead are seen more affirmatively than the living (Allison & Eylon, 2004). This phenomenon has been interpreted based on terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszcynski, 1991; see also Allison, Eylon, Beggan, & Bacheldor, 2009; Hayes, 2016), whereby a person's death arouses our fear of death and motivates us to protect our cultural worldview, whereupon we assess the dead more favorably.

Allison et al. prepared two profiles of a fictitious entrepreneur (manipulated as to whether he was alive or dead) and randomly assigned one to each participant. The experiment revealed that the leader's abilities and achievements were valued more highly under the dead target condition (vs. the living target condition) (Allison & Eylon, 2004; Allison et al., 2009, Studies 1 and 2).

The death positivity bias applies as well to actual people one knows. Hayes (2016) asked the participants to choose a close person to them, imagine that the person was dead, and evaluate their character. As expected, those who were assigned to the dead condition used more positive words than those assigned to the living condition.

Allison et al. (2009, Study 3) also found this bias in magazine articles. They picked eight famous people who had already died (a politician, athlete, musician, and so on) and compared articles written five years before and after their deaths. More positive words and fewer negative words were used in the articles after their deaths.

In light of the research above, we may conclude that it is general for the dead to be valued more highly than when they were living.

1.2 The death positivity bias in the evaluation of paintings

In the world of painting, it is common for a painter not to be valued until his or her death. For example, Vincent van Gogh and Amadeo Modigliani were not appreciated in their lifetimes and only came to be valued after their deaths (Ikeuchi, 1998). Green & Mohler (2014) mentioned a positive bias in evaluating a dead creator as reverence for the dead in their discussion, and stated that it was interesting to examine this bias in evaluations of various works of art, literature, and durable goods.

In fact, research on the winning bids for paintings whose painters had died have been conducted (the death effect: Itaya & Ursprung, 2016; Maddison & Pedersen, 2008). However, bids in auctions are affected by various factors, for example, how

keen the competition was, who participated in the auctions (e.g., juridical persons or private persons), or why the participants bid (to hold the work or to sell it speculatively). Of course, research focusing on auctions is helpful in studying the death positivity bias in the evaluation of paintings, but the factors above were not controlled, so high prices do not necessarily reflect the bias. Green (2016) wrote that in future study, it would be useful to examine how the creator's death would influence subjective impressions of the work, not the prices.

1.3 The scarcity of paintings

Even if an experimenter shows a painting, asks the participants to evaluate it as per Green (2016), and finds a difference between living and dead artists, it cannot be immediately concluded that the difference is due to the death positivity bias. An artist's death also means that she will no longer provide new works, that is, the scarcity of the existing works increases (scarcity effect; Lynn, 1991). In previous studies targeting businesspeople, politicians, athletes, or lay people, it has been unnecessary to consider this but when examining artists, whose works remain after their deaths, this issue needs consideration.

If a painter's death only increases the scarcity of the remained paintings, the difference between the living and dead conditions will be as large as that between the living condition and the condition where the painter has stopped working (called the stop-painting condition below). If a painter's death increases the participants' anxiety of death in addition to the scarcity, motivating them to protect their cultural worldview, it is expected that the former difference will be greater than the latter.

1.4 The purpose of this research

This research was conducted for the three purposes below.

- Purpose 1:
  To examine whether the death positivity bias can be found in evaluations of a painting.
- Purpose 2:
  To examine whether the painting and the painter are valued more highly under the stop-painting condition than the living condition.
- Purpose 3:
  To examine whether the painting and the painter are valued more highly under the dead condition than the stop-painting condition.

2. Methods
2.1 Participants

The participants were recruited mainly through LINE or Twitter from September to November 2019. A total of 73 participants whose responses were analyzed were aged from 18 to 55 (mean age (*SD*) = 22.74 (4.53)), the majority of whom were university students in Tokyo. The sample comprised 45 males (61.6 %) and 25 females (34.2 %), and the rest failed to specify their sex. After the experiment, the participants received rewards.

2.2 Procedure

After examination and approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the affiliated institution, the experiment was conducted online. The stimuli presented are detailed below.

2.2.1 Presenting the scenarios

One of the three profiles of a fictitious painter was shown (see Appendix 1). In the dead condition, the profile said that the painter had died three years before. In the stop-painting condition, the profile said that the painter had stopped painting three years before. In the living condition, no such statement was written. The profiles stated that the painter had won a prize in a contest. For the artist's death to have a positive effect on the final price in an auction, the painter needs a certain degree of reputation (Penasse, Renneboog, & Scheinkman, 2019). It was confirmed in advance that no one whose first and family names were same as the painter was returned in the results of a Google search. In addition, several people uninvolved in the study read the profiles before the experiment and found no questionable points in them.

2.2.2 Manipulation check of the scenarios

The participants were tested as to whether they comprehended the profile. Seven answered incorrectly and five had doubts about the profile; they were excluded from the sample.

2.2.3 Presentation of the painting

A painting described as a work created and uploaded onto the Internet by the painter was then shown to the participants. In the beginning, a copyright-free painting was used in the pilot study, but as the evaluation showed a floor effect, *Barges on the Seine* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (see Appendix 2) was used. This work was selected for two reasons: First, the painter died more than 70 years ago and the copyright protection has thus expired.[1] Second, this work is not so famous in Japan.[2]

2.2.4 Checking whether the participants knew the painting

The participants were asked whether they had ever seen or heard about the painter or the painting, and the three who answered "yes" or "it is vaguely familiar" were also excluded from the sample. The number of participants and their attributions above include only those remaining after these checks.

2.2.5 Evaluation of the painting and the painter

As the dependent variables, four items about the painting and two about the painter (Table 1) were measured on 5-point scales ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree.

3. Results

RStudio (ver.1.1.423) for Mac was used for analysis.

3.1 Scaling and fundamental statistics

For the four questions about the painting presented in Table 1, Cronbach's α had a sufficiently high value ($\alpha = .84$), so their simple mean was adopted as the painting evaluation score. Similarly, for the two questions about the painter shown on Table 1, the correlation coefficient was sufficient ($r = .81$), so their simple mean was adopted as the painter evaluation score. The means of these two variables were 3.65 ($SD = 0.73$) and 3.41 ($SD = 0.83$), respectively, and their correlation coefficient was $r =$

Table 1: Questions asked as dependent variables

	Question items
Evaluation of the painting	1 This painting is beautiful
	2 This painting is drawn well
	3 I like this painting
	4 This painting is elegant
Evaluation of the painter	1 This painter is great
	2 This painter is gifted

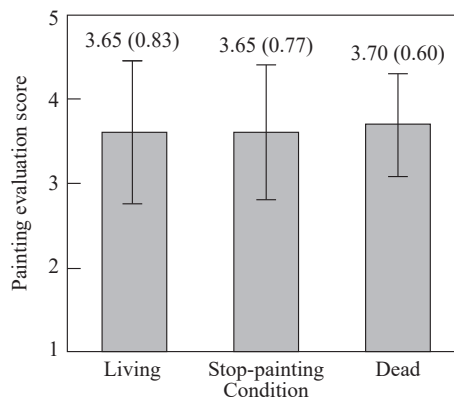Note: All questions were scored on 5-point scales and originally written in Japanese.

Figure 1: Painting evaluation scores

Notes: The numbers show the mean (standard deviation). Error bars represent standard deviations.
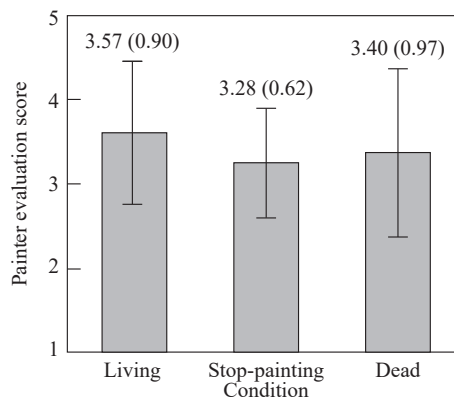

Figure 2: Painter evaluation scores.

Notes: The numbers show the mean (standard deviation). Error bars represent standard deviations.

.68.

3.2 One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)

One-way ANOVAs were conducted with the conditions of the scenarios as independent variables and the painting and painter evaluation scores as dependent variables.

The main effects of scenario were not significant for either the painting score (F (1,71) = 0.00, *n.s.*) or the painter score (F (1,71) = 1.33, *n.s.*). These results indicate that the death positivity bias (Purposes 1 and 3) and scarcity effect (Purpose 2) were not manifested in this case of evaluating a painting.

4. Discussion

In this study, a scenario experiment was conducted to examine whether the death positivity bias and scarcity effect would be manifested in evaluations of painting. Neither a death positivity bias nor a scarcity effect was found.

4.1 Implications of this research: Range of application

Researchers have to a certain extent considered the death positivity bias robust. In fact, the death positivity bias has been repeatedly found regardless of whether the target is real or fictitious, the target's occupation (e.g., businesspeople, politicians, athletes, musicians, or ordinary people), or whether the target has some relation with the participants. This bias was also found in Japan. In one study, just asked to imagine that a real close person had died, the participants positively evaluated the targeted person's personality (Nishi & Shiraiwa, 2020). As mentioned above, the tendency of Japanese people to avoid criticizing the dead and to focus on their merits has been observed (Fujimura, 2011; Soeda, 2003; Speech Kobo, 2006). These empirical indications have shown that the death positivity bias seems to be general. Therefore, it is not reasonable to attribute this result to the Japanese people or Japanese culture. This study is different from previous studies in that the dead person and the object to be evaluated are separable. This study mainly focuses on an object (a painting) independent of the painter, whereas previous research focused on the deceased's characters, abilities, or contributions to society, which are inseparable from them. This difference might lead to different results. In other words, a painting, which is a separable object, may not be subject to the effects of such information as its painter's death, while the evaluation for inseparable features (e.g., character or ability) is so subject.

It is possible for this tendency to be strengthened by using paintings, which are generally believed to reflect some special talent or skill. Many people might believe that they can or should appreciate a painting regardless of the artist's attribution or status (e.g., dead or alive), and this belief could reduce the death positivity bias. On this assumption, when evaluating objects like paintings, which are separable from their creator and which are believed to be easy to tell prominent works from ordinary ones (such as literary works or pieces of music), it is expected that the death positivity bias will have less influence on the evaluation.

In summary, it is suggested that the death positivity bias is a limited effect pertaining especially to the evaluation of a dead person's inseparable features (e.g., their character or ability). This study provides a new viewpoint about the limits of the death positivity bias.

4.2 Implications of this research: The cause of the death positivity bias

This study also calls into question the causes of the death positivity bias as hypothesized so far. As already stated, this phenomenon has been interpreted based on terror management theory (e.g., Allison et al., 2009; Hayes, 2016). However, no previous research has directly examined the effect of the fear of death on person evaluation and obtained the expected result. Moreover, in this study using a painting, the death positivity bias itself was not found. If the death information had had the effect, the evaluation in the dead condition should have been higher than the others.

The latest research has shown that positive attitudes to the dead are caused not by fear of death but by the personal belief that one should not speak ill of the dead (Nishi & Shiraiwa, 2020). This result suggests that the death positivity bias is caused by a kind of social norm, and the idea is consistent with the concept of reverence for the dead (Green & Mohler, 2014). From this point of view, the death positivity bias was not seen in the evaluation of the painting and the painter because an art evaluation is done severely and is not so affected by social norms.

In summary, the death positivity bias has been thought to be caused by the fear of death, but the bias might instead be explained as due to a social norm of showing manners to the dead. Although indirect, this result suggests that the latter is the case.

4.3 Limitations and future directions

This study introduces a new perspective on the causes and scope of the death positivity bias. However, the manipulation of the factor of scarcity of the painting in this study needs improvement. In our experiment, when the participants were shown the painting, they were informed that it had been uploaded onto the Internet. This explanation might strengthen the feeling of accessibility of the drawing, lowering the impression of rareness and negating the scarcity effect (Lynn, 1991) in the stop-painting condition. It would be desirable to inform them that the picture is in a museum rather than on the Internet.[3]

Future research focusing on objects that are separable from their creator and believed to reflect their skill or talent (e.g., poems, novels, or pieces of music) might make it possible to test the robustness of this result and to clarify the conditions and

scope of applicability of the death positivity bias.

Notes

(1) Based on the Copyright Research and Information Center for Foreign Copyright Law of France (Retrieved from https://www.cric.or.jp/db/world/france/france_c1.html, July, 20, 2019.)

(2) While the experiment was being conducted, a painting exhibition including Renoir's works was held in a neighboring prefecture. The painting used in the experiment was not exhibited there.

(3) It is necessary to be aware of social conformity in preferences (Klucharev, Hytönen, Rijpkema, Smidts, & Fernández, 2009; Nunoi & Yoshikawa, 2019) when instructing the participants that the painting is in a famous museum.

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Appendix 1

The profiles shown to the participants (originally written in Japanese):

Ryoya, Takeyama (<u>(1) (2) 1979–/ (3) 1979–2016</u>)

Born in Chiba Pref. In junior high school, he belonged to the athletic club, but in high school he was invited to the art club by a friend and became interested in painting. When he was a sophomore in high school, he won the silver medal in a prefectural contest and decided to attend a college of arts in the Kanto region. However, his father's business failed and he had to work after graduating from high school. Besides working, he continued to paint. After he started uploading his works to his blog, he gradually gained appreciation and popularity. <u>(1) His areas of activity are expanding; for example, he has held an annual private exhibition in his hometown in Chiba Pref. since 2013. / (2) His areas of activity were expanding; for example, he held an annual private exhibition in his hometown in Chiba Pref. starting in 2013. However, in 2016 he reported that he had stopped painting because of the pressure of the main business of his blog, and since then he has not held an exhibition. / (3)</u>

His areas of activity were expanding; for example, he held an annual private exhibition in his hometown in Chiba Pref. from 2013. However, in 2016, while he was painting, he suddenly fainted, was taken to the hospital, and was dead on arrival. Aged 37.

Note: The underlined parts were manipulated. (1) is the living condition, (2) is the stop-painting condition, and (3) is the dead condition.

Appendix 2

The picture shown to the participants is below.

Figure 3: *Barges on the Seine* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir

Note: In the experiment, a colored one was shown.