

Examining developmental and religious differences in trait attributions to dead agents

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Internal (Natural) vs. external

Bering's research is built upon existing naturalistic theories of religion, such as teleological reasoning, common-sense dualism, and the theory of mind.

In his view the majority of people turn to religion because of subjective negative experiences, not objective events in the hostile environment.



Teleological reasoning

- Bering traced our tendency to believe in the supernatural to instinct. Even if events in the universe are random, we tend to find a pattern or a purpose in these events. This tendency was developed among our ancestors throughout the history of evolution.
- Many people are helpless while facing unfortunate events, and one adaptive or coping mechanism people use is to optimize negative outcomes that are out of their control, such as putting their faith on an external agency (e.g. God) (Bering, 2003, 2012).

Theory of Mind



Bering (2002) hypothesized that humans have a natural tendency to perceive that cognitive systems continue to function after death, and this disposition might be the psychological foundation of religion. The underlying mechanism of this inclination is called the “theory of mind” (Bering, 2006, p.253).

Bering et al. study

- Puppet alligator “ate” puppet rat. Children still believed that the rat “missed” his mother.
- Obituary: People tend to say nice things related to the kindness/morality of the dead.
- Ghost story: Examinees tended not to cheat when they were told that the ghost of the programmer who created the computerized exam was haunting.



Bering's study

- Dead agent: Participants were asked to rate the traits of three strangers displayed in photos.
- A week later they returned to continue the study but were told that one of the persons had died over the weekend.
- Afterwards, on average, participants rated the dead person more favorably than others, and this result was interpreted by fear of supernatural punishment.

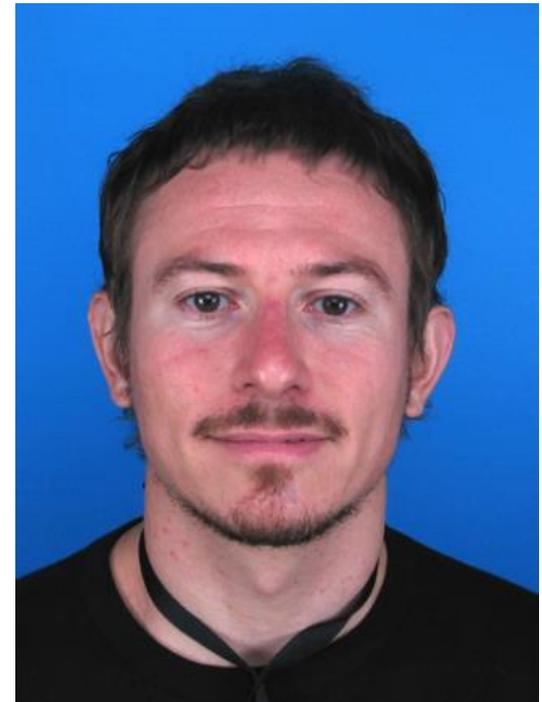
Problems

- There are alternate explanations to this outcome.
- The works of a deceased artist may become more valuable because this artist can no longer produce any more paintings. Similarly, we may say nice things to the dead out of sympathy.
- Data collected from their study cannot identify the cause of positive attributions.

Replication

- Take religious belief into account
- Ask the participants why they gave higher ratings to the dead person.
- Does religious background effect the trait attribute ratings of dead and non-dead agents (between-subject)?
- Does the trait attribute ratings of dead and non-dead agents differ from the first and second sessions (within-subject)?
- Is there an interaction effect between the within-subject and between-subject factors?

Select photos by scores



Instrument: EOOQ

1	Code	Category
2	Creative	Achievement-relatedness
3	Wise	Achievement-relatedness
4	Intelligent	Achievement-relatedness
5	Kind	Kindness/morality
6	Hypocritical	Kindness/morality
7	Trustworthy	Kindness/morality
8	Phony	Kindness/morality
9	Sad	Kindness/morality
10	Cruel	Kindness/morality
11	Snobby	Kindness/morality
12	Hard-working	Kindness/morality
13	Happy with their lives	Kindness/morality
14	Good-looking	Kindness/morality
15	Ethical	Kindness/morality
16	Competent	Kindness/morality
17	Efficient	Kindness/morality
18	Conceited	Kindness/morality
19	Moody	Kindness/morality
20	Knowledgeable	Kindness/morality

21	Dishonest	Kindness/morality
22	Likable	Kindness/morality
23	Depressed	Kindness/morality
24	helpful	Kindness/morality
25	Easy to get along with	Kindness/morality
26	Selfish	Kindness/morality
27	Loving	Kindness/morality
28	Accomplished	Kindness/morality
29	Psychologically healthy	Kindness/morality
30	Talented	Kindness/morality
31	Charming	Social skills
32	Good sense of humor	Social skills
33	Friendly	Social skills
34	Attractive	Social skills
35	Shy	Social skills
36	Fun to work with	Social skills
37	Sorrow	Subjective well-being
38	Anxious	Subjective well-being
39	Happy with themselves	Subjective well-being

Interview questions

- Can you guess the purpose of this study?
- Why do you give the dead person a more positive rating than others?
- Do you believe in supernatural beings? Please explain.
- Did you experience any supernatural event in the past? Please explain.
- Are you afraid that if you didn't give positive rating to the dead person, you may face some negative consequence? Please explain.

Three cases are excluded....

Because they know what we tried to do by guessing

n = 38

Frequencies		
Level	Count	Prob
Criminals	2	0.05000
How people would judge others	1	0.02500
Judging people	1	0.02500
Judging people by appearance	3	0.07500
Judging personality	1	0.02500
No	16	0.40000
No, maybe about stereotypes	1	0.02500
Personality of criminals	1	0.02500
Prejudice	2	0.05000
Psychological Screening	1	0.02500
Racial profiling	2	0.05000
Racial profiling - crime	1	0.02500
Racial profiling - white men are less likely to be feared	1	0.02500
Stereotyping	2	0.05000
Sympathy Experiment	1	0.02500
The study of whether or not someone is dead affects how we view their personality	1	0.02500
To see how feelings have changed knowing the individual has passed away	1	0.02500
To see if expression/races has an impact how we judge people	1	0.02500
To see if I would rate the dead person better than the last time	1	0.02500
Total	40	1.00000
N Missing	1	
19 Levels		

Quantitative results

Between Subjects

Sum

M Matrix

M-transformed Parameter Estimates

All Between

Test	Value	Exact F	NumDF	DenDF	Prob>F
F Test	0.0021426	0.0728	1	34	0.7889

Intercept

Test	Value	Exact F	NumDF	DenDF	Prob>F
F Test	44.769857	1522.1751	1	34	<.0001*

Belief

Test	Value	Exact F	NumDF	DenDF	Prob>F
F Test	0.0021426	0.0728	1	34	0.7889

Within Subjects

Contrast

M Matrix

M-transformed Parameter Estimates

All Within Interactions

Test	Value	Exact F	NumDF	DenDF	Prob>F
F Test	0.0014279	0.0485	1	34	0.8269

Time

Test	Value	Exact F	NumDF	DenDF	Prob>F
F Test	0.1260509	4.2857	1	34	0.0461*

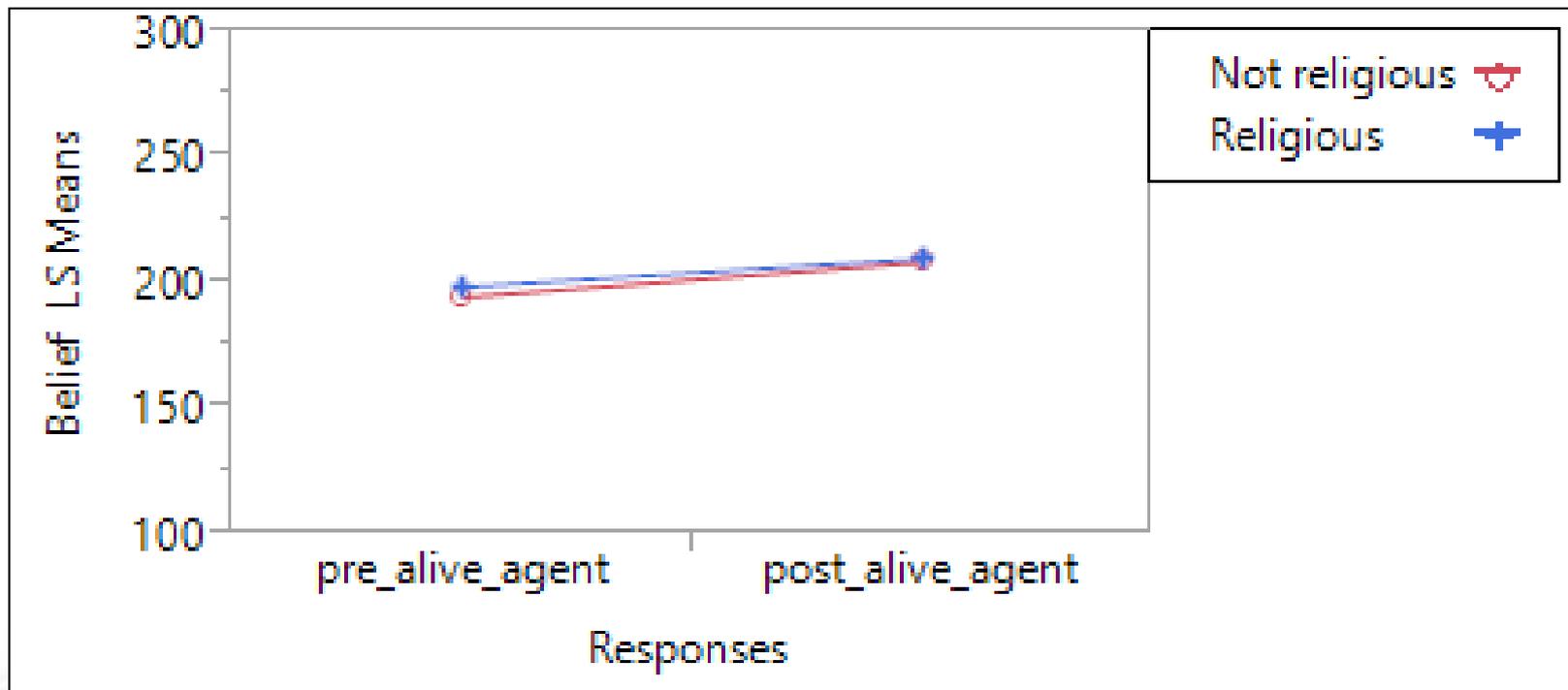
Time*Belief

Test	Value	Exact F	NumDF	DenDF	Prob>F
F Test	0.0014279	0.0485	1	34	0.8269

There is an within-subject factor effect (posttest-pretest) for alive agents; but no between-group effect (religious vs. non-religious)

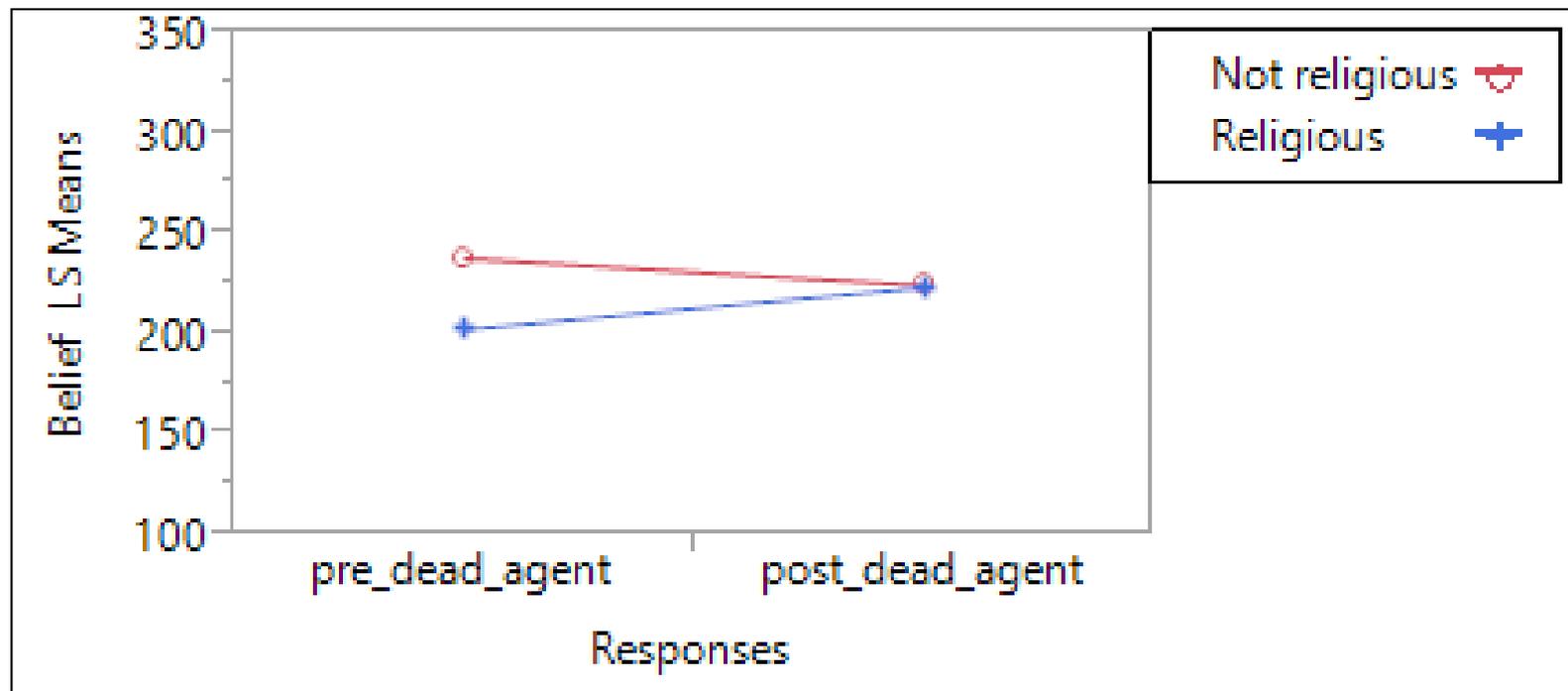
Quantitative results

- Almost no difference between religious and non-religious participants in rating of the alive persons.



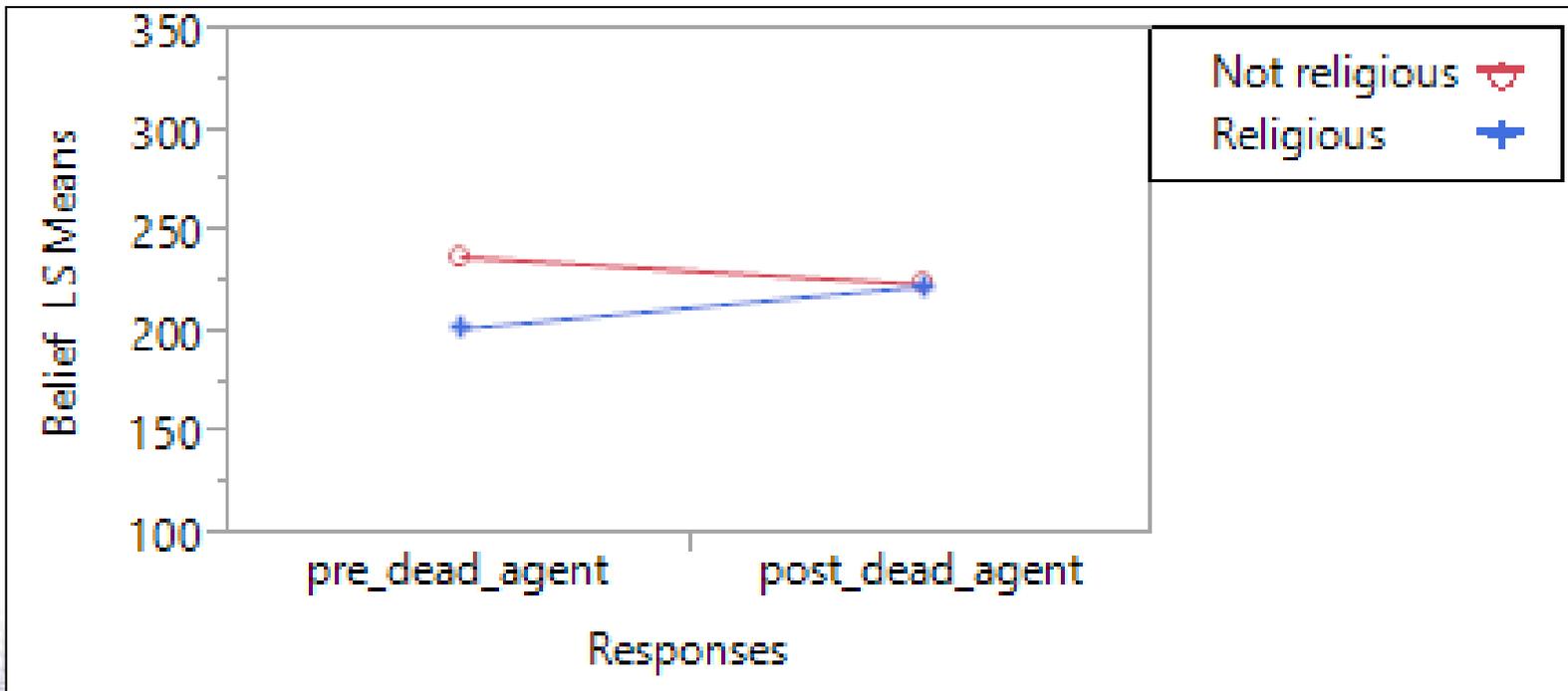
Quantitative results

- After the religious participants were told that the young man is dead, their post-rating to the dead” was higher than their pre-rating.



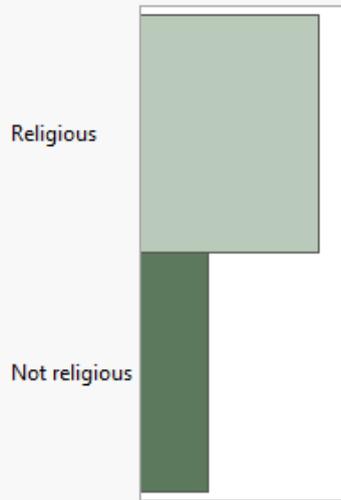
Quantitative results

- The rating for the “dead” by non-religious participants decreased from pretest to posttest.
- In the posttest their scores are the same as that of religious participants.

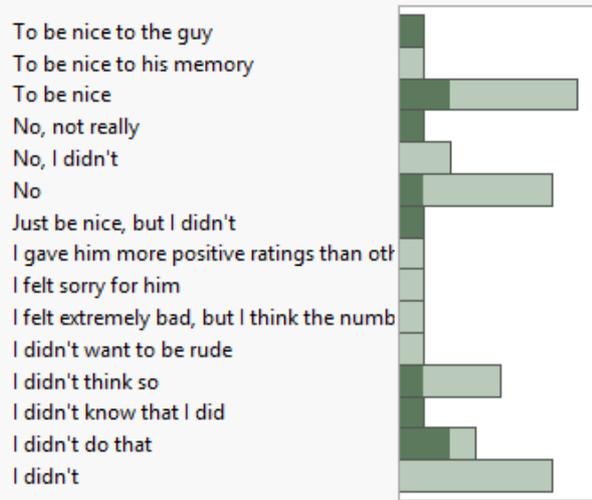


Distributions

Belief



Post_rating_interview_2



Frequencies

Level	Count	Prob
Not religious	10	0.27778
Religious	26	0.72222
Total	36	1.00000
N Missing	5	
2 Levels		

Frequencies

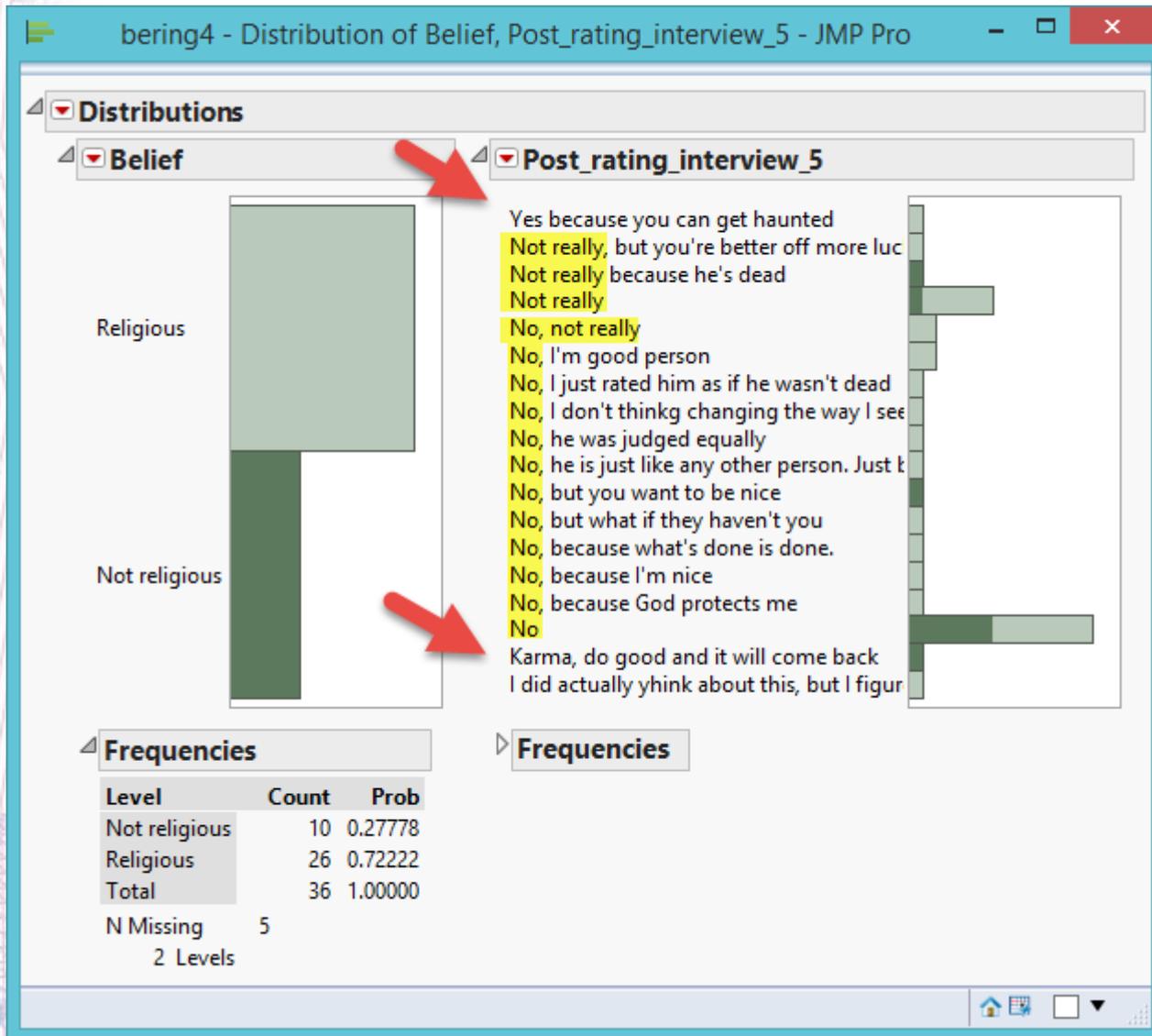
Level	Count	Prob
I didn't	6	0.16216
I didn't do that	3	0.08108
I didn't know that I did	1	0.02703
I didn't think so	4	0.10811
I didn't want to be rude	1	0.02703
I felt extremely bad, but I think the numbers for him were still not as high	1	0.02703
I felt sorry for him	1	0.02703
I gave him more positive ratings than others	1	0.02703
Just be nice, but I didn't	1	0.02703
No	6	0.16216
No, I didn't	2	0.05405
No, not really	1	0.02703
To be nice	7	0.18919
To be nice to his memory	1	0.02703
To be nice to the guy	1	0.02703
Total	37	1.00000
N Missing	4	
15 Levels		

Qualitative

“Just be nice”

Dark-green cases are non-religious

Qualitative results



Most are not afraid of ghosts (Yellow highlight).

Only two said yes (red arrow)

Conclusion

- Giving higher ratings to the dead does not necessarily imply that we have the natural tendency of believing in supernaturals or active dead agents.
- The quantitative analysis shows that non-religious participants did not increase their ratings from pretest to posttest.
- The qualitative data indicate that people just wanted to be nice to the dead.
- Most people reported that they are not afraid of ghosts.