Awe inspiring: The influence altruism has on feeling awe


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Introduction

“I know man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed.”

This statement by Moses, the ancient Jewish prophet, describes his encounter with the God of the Old Testament in the iconic story of the burning bush. In Moses’ exclamation we get a sense of the power of the experience, his feeling of inadequacy after speaking to deity, and his newfound perspective of himself and the human race. In essence, Moses was awestruck.

According to theory, awe is a characteristically unique positive emotion felt in response to a stimulus that is vast and leads to accommodation (Keilner & Hadl, 2003). In other words, feeling something is larger than oneself and needing to adjust one’s perspective to assimilate the experience. Prior research has linked awe to significant behavioral outcomes including greater prosocial activity (Rudd et al., 2012). Current research almost exclusively focuses on how awe is induced from individuals’ interactions with nature or music (Pöhl et al., Rudd et al., 2012; Shiota et al., 2006, 2007; Valdesolo et al., 2014); however, theory postulates a variety of stimuli that induce awe, including being in the presence of a powerful or impressive individual (Keilner & Hadl, 2003). The purpose of this study is to investigate whether an impressive individual can induce a feeling of awe in others and whether feeling awe will lead to more individuals choosing to engage in helping behaviors compared to participants assigned to a positive emotional control condition.

STUDY HYPOTHESES

1. Participants will report higher feelings of awe in awe manipulated conditions compared to a positive emotional control.
2. An impressive individual will induce a feeling of awe in others.
3. More participants will voluntarily choose to help another person after feeling awe compared to a positive emotional control.

METHODS

Participants

Participants included 247 undergraduate students from a private religious northwestern university. The sample was comprised of 65.2% females, 81.8% White, 10.1% Hispanic or Latino, 1.6% Black/African American, 1.60% Asian, 1.2% Other, and 2.8% reporting Two or More Races. Mean age=20.92 yrs (SD=2.61).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of three short video clips: an Awe Nature (AweN) clip, an Awe Impressive Individual (AweIMP) clip, or a positive emotional control Humor video. In the AweN and Humor conditions we utilized video clips validated by prior research (Pöhl et al., 2015; Shiota, et al., 2007, & Valdesolo & Graham, 2014). For the AweIMP condition we produced a short clip presenting the story of Irena Sendler, an unsung hero who helped save over 2,000 children in the Warsaw Ghetto during WWII at great personal peril. Participants then completed a short survey and were invited to “assist a student needing survey participants”.

Measures

1. Single Word Emotional Assessment (ONE-W): Participants were asked to rate the appropriateness of certain words, such as awe and amusement, on a scale from 1 (not appropriate at all) to 7 (very appropriate) to describe their emotions during the video (Shiota et al., 2007). We added the word “amusement” to this assessment.
2. Appraisals of Awe Related Experiences (APRS): Participants were asked to rate their awe-related appraisals of the experience, using a scale from 1 (not true at all) to 7 (very true). APRS included, “I felt small or insignificant”, for example (α=.78) (Shiota et al., 2007).
3. Overall Video Assessment (VIDA): Participants were asked to “Please rate your agreement with each statement about the video below on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree)”. For example, statements included “The video was humorous” (Shiota et al., 2007).
4. Dispositional Positive Emotions Scale – Awe (DPES-A): Participants were asked the six awe-related questions of the DPES (Shiota et al., 2006) and to report on a 7-point scale their level of agreement with statements such as “I often feel awe” (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree) (α=.78). This scale was added in a later round of data collection so only 178 of the 247 total participants received these questions.

RESULTS

Significant main effects were found for mean comparisons between each video condition and the ONE-W awe and amusement assessments, as well as the APRS and VIDA (p < .001 for each ANOVA test. Data output available upon request).

CONCLUSIONS

• To our knowledge, this is the first study designed to gather empirical evidence on whether an impressive individual influences others’ feeling of awe using measures common to awe research.
• Support for each hypothesis was found, however fewer than five participants volunteered to assist in the service task from the Humor video condition so chi-square analyses were not calculated to verify group membership.
• Conceivably, some results may be explained by the highly religious sample. We are currently investigating whether this population is uniquely sensitive to feeling awe.
References

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