Redefining Awe and Elevation: A Pilot Study
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INTRODUCTION

“Is it really possible to tell someone else what one feels?”

With this passionate inquiry, drawn out by a sense of tragic loneliness, Leo Tolstoy’s character Anna Karenina artfully expresses a significant frustration: that of the limitations inherent to the use of language in describing the human experience. In relating this, Tolstoy may have unknowingly depicted an issue relative to two constructs found in the current body of positive psychological literature: awe and elevation. Elevation (a.k.a. moral elevation) has captivated the attention of researchers with its connections to self-improvement, pro-sociality, and man’s higher nature (Haidt, 2000 and Haidt, 2001). Unsurprisingly, several of the aforementioned associations also belong to the more familiar emotion of awe, which raises the question as to whether a distinction between awe and elevation (in both their elicitors and associated outcomes) exists. As a distinguishing factor, elevation does not include the “central feature” of vastness necessary to be categorized as “awe”, leaving elevation potentially distinct from awe (Kelmer, 2003). However, according to Shiota et al. (2007) vastness may be implied in a stimulus’ effect on an individual, not merely by its physical quality. This study gathered pilot data investigating whether a distinction between awe and elevation existed. If no differentiation in outcomes between study groups can be found, elevation might then be characterized in the “social elicitors” subcategory of awe (See Kelmer & Haidt, 2003 and Schartz et al., 2012 for review).

STUDY HYPOTHESES

1. Participants will report significantly greater elevation/awe responses in both experimental conditions compared to our humor control condition.
2. Participants’ self-reported emotional reactions in our elevation and awe conditions will not significantly differ.
3. An auditory stimulus (respective to experimental condition) will elicit feelings of humor, elevation, and awe in participants.

METHODS

Participants

Undergraduates from a private religious northwestern university were recruited (N=91). The sample was comprised of 72.5% females, 87.8% White, 7.7% Hispanic or Latino, 3.3% Asian, and 1.1% reporting Two or More Races. Mean age= 20.37 years (SD=2.37).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to listen to one of three audio clips: an awe clip (Awe, describing the deeds of Irena Sendler), an elevation clip (Elevation, detailing an act of human altruism), and a positive emotional control (Humor) clip. The audio clips utilized for the awe and elevation conditions build on previously validated work by Martin et al. (manuscript in preparation). Participants then completed a short survey in which they reported their awe/elevation-related emotions and reactions.

METHODS CONT’D

Measures

1. Moral Elevation Scale-Views of Humanity (MEvoh): Participants were asked to rate their feelings of elevation on a scale of 1 (never) to 7 (always) as they considered their perceptions of the world, themselves, and others (Aquino et al., 2011). MEvoh items included, “The world is full of kindness and generosity”, for example (Cronbach’s α=.92) (Aquino et al., 2011).
2. Moral Elevation Scale-Desire to be a Better Person (MEdbbp): Participants were asked to rate their feelings of elevation on a scale of 1 (never) to 7 (always) (Aquino et al., 2011) to items like “I want to be more like the person/people in the story”, for example (Cronbach’s α=.90) (Aquino et al., 2011).
3. One-Word Emotional Assessments (ONEW): 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 after each presentation (Shiota et al., 2007). The following words were added to this scale: amusement, surprise, inspired, compassion, and admiration.
4. 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 items included, “I felt small or insignificant”, for example (Cronbach’s α=.73) (Shiota et al., 2007).

RESULTS

Results support all three hypotheses. Participants in the elevation and awe conditions reported significantly higher feelings of awe compared to the humor condition (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). Emotional reactions of participants in the elevation and awe conditions did not significantly differ (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). The auditory stimulus respective to experimental condition elicited feelings of humor, elevation, and awe in participants (See Figure 2). Data output is available upon request.

Figure 1. Self-Report Emotional Assessments and Appraisals Mean Scores Between Study Conditions.

Figure 2. Comparison of Mean ONEW-a Item Scores Across Study Conditions.

Note. a and b indicate heterogeneous groups from post hoc comparisons using Scheffé correction. Differences between the elevation and humor conditions, and the awe and humor conditions were significant (p < .05). Post hoc comparisons revealed no significant difference between the elevation and awe conditions for the APRSa (p = .805), MEvoh (p = .465) and MEdbbp (p = .611).

CONCLUSIONS

• A lack of distinction between awe and elevation indicates that elevation may fit within the “social elicitors” category of awe (Kelmer, 2003; Schartz, 2012).
• Findings hold important implications for the current literature in addition to behavioral interventions or therapeutic strategies which employ positive emotions.
• Further inquiry into the predictors and outcomes of awe/elevation relative to any potential distinction between the constructs is highly encouraged.
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References


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