

Awe may promote altruistic behavior

May 19 2015



Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Inducing a sense of awe in people can promote altruistic, helpful and positive social behavior according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Our investigation indicates that awe, although often fleeting and hard to describe, serves a vital social function. By diminishing the emphasis on the individual self, awe may encourage people to forgo strict self-interest to improve the welfare of others," said Paul Piff, PhD, assistant

professor of psychology and [social behavior](#) at the University of California, Irvine. He was lead author of the study, which was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Awe is that sense of wonder we feel in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world. People commonly experience awe in nature, but also in response to religion, art and even music.

In the article, Piff and his colleagues outlined a series of five studies. In the first, the researchers asked a representative sample of over 1,500 people from across the United States to complete a questionnaire that measured how predisposed they were to experience awe. The subjects were then asked to participate in a game where they were given 10 raffle tickets and had to decide how many, if any, to share with another participant who did not have any tickets. Researchers found a significant association between the tendency to experience awe and generosity.

In the other four experiments, the researchers asked groups of people (ranging in size from 75 to 254) to participate in an activity (e.g., watch a video or gaze at something in their environment) designed to elicit awe, a neutral state or another reaction, such as pride or amusement. The participants then engaged in an activity designed to measure what psychologists call pro-social behaviors or tendencies. (Pro-social behavior is positive, helpful and intended to promote social acceptance and friendship.) In every experiment, awe was significantly associated with pro-social behaviors.

The researchers said they believe that awe induces a feeling of being diminished in the presence of something greater than oneself. It is this diminished sense of self that shifts focus away from an individual's need and toward the greater good, they wrote.

"When experiencing awe, you may not, egocentrically speaking, feel like you're at the center of the world anymore," Piff said. "By shifting attention toward larger entities and diminishing the emphasis on the individual self, we reasoned that awe would trigger tendencies to engage in pro-social behaviors that may be costly for you but that benefit and help others."

While the findings supported the researchers' initial hypothesis, the scientists were surprised at how consistently different types of awe and different elicitors of awe were able to promote cooperative behavior. In one experiment, they elicited awe by showing droplets of colored water falling into a bowl of milk in slow motion. In another, they elicited a negative form of awe using a montage of threatening natural phenomena, such as tornadoes and volcanoes. In a final experiment, the researchers induced awe by situating participants in a grove of towering eucalyptus trees.

"Across all these different elicitors of awe, we found the same sorts of effects—people felt smaller, less self-important, and behaved in a more pro-social fashion," said Piff. "Might awe cause people to become more invested in the greater good, giving more to charity, volunteering to help others, or doing more to lessen their impact on the environment? Our research would suggest that the answer is yes."

More information: "Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior," by Paul Piff, PhD, University of California, Irvine; Pia Dietze, BA, New York University; Matthew Feinberg, PhD, University of Toronto; and Daniel Stancato, BA, and Dacher Keltner, University of California, Berkeley. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online May 18, 2015. [dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000018](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000018)

Provided by American Psychological Association

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