

Connecting awe with virtues: Evidence from beneficiary sensitivity and consumption behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The awe, defined as perceived vastness and need for accommodation, connects with a sense of smallness of the self, and with moral greatness. However, the effect of awe on morality remains unclear in empirical research. Two studies were designed to examine the relationship of awe experience to moral beliefs and behaviors and consumption behaviors. As expected, awe experience positively associated with beneficiary sensitivity (e.g., guilty with one's own benefits), but not with victim sensitivity (e.g., anger with one's own suffering) (Study 1); awe experience uniquely predicted more preference of altruism in the Dictator Game, whereas joy, a typical positive emotion, uniquely predicted more preference of brand-product consumption (Study 2). Considered together, the present findings reveal an intriguing other-oriented effect of awe on

motivations and behaviors, offering empirical evidence of theoretical definitions in that awe connects virtues.

INTRODUCTION

Awe is defined as the perceived vastness, and a need for accommodation, an inability to assimilate an experience into current mental structures. Five additional appraisals account for variation in the hedonic tone of awe experiences: threat, beauty, exceptional ability, virtue, and the supernatural (Keltner and Haidt, 2003, Shiota *et al.*, 2007).

Awe was also described as one of the “other-praising” emotions just like gratitude and elevation; but not like the “self-conscious” emotions such as pride, guilt, and shame (Horberg *et al.*, 2011). It arises from the perceived moral virtue of others (Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Haidt, 2003), and has “an impact on the content of the self-concept, increasing one’s sense of the self as part of a greater whole—a self-concept that deemphasizes the individual self” (Shiota *et al.*, 2007). Experimental priming of awe was found to lead people to emphasis on membership in “universal” categories of participants’ self-concepts, and to express feelings of oneness with others (Van Cappellen and Saroglou, 2012). All in all, awe connects with a sense of smallness of the self, and with moral greatness. However, the effect of awe on moral behaviors remains unclear in empirical research.

Two studies were designed to examine the relationship of awe experience to others-oriented and self-oriented emotions and behaviors. Specifically, we explored the association of dispositional awe with beneficiary sensitivity (Study 1), with altruism preference and brand-product consumption (Study 2).

STUDY 1

In the first study, we investigated Chinese college students to determine whether awe evidences the self-oriented suggested by previous literatures. Two kinds of justice sensitivity (JS), beneficiary sensitivity concerning others and victim sensitivity concerning self, were considered here.

Justice sensitivity is a personality disposition to explain individual differences in reactions to unfair situations. The JS-Victim is sensitivity with regard to experiencing injustice towards oneself, and JS-Beneficiary is sensitivity to profiting from unfair events. It is argued that JS-beneficiary indicates a genuine, "other-oriented" concern for justice and social responsibility, whereas JS-Victim indicates a mixture of "self-related" and justice-related concerns (Gollwitzer *et al.*, 2005).

Specifically, we hypothesized that, dispositional awe uniquely relates to social values of other-oriented (JS-Beneficiary), but not to those of self-oriented (JS-Victim).

Method

Participants: Three hundred ninety college students (203 female, aged from 18 to 24 years) were recruited from social psychology courses at a university in southeastern China. Each student got extra credits for participation in this study.

Materials: Shiota et al. (2006) Dispositional Positive Emotion Scale with 6 items about awe experience (e.g., "I often feel awe," "I have many opportunities to see the beauty of nature," 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) , was used to assess the emotion of awe. With a good reliability ($\alpha = 0.76$), higher scores reflected a stronger emotional experience of awe.

We employed Schmitt (2005) Justice Sensitivity Inventory with 10 items about JS from beneficiary perspective (e.g., "I feel guilty when I am better off than others for no reason," "It bothers me when things come easily to me that others have to work hard for"), and 10 items about JS from victim perspective (e.g., "It makes me angry when others are undeservingly better off than me," "It worries me when I have to work hard for things that come easily to others"). Participants were instructed to respond on a 0-5 Likert scale (0=not at all, 5=exactly), and both of their current reliabilities (Cronbach's α) were 0.88.

Results

As shown in Table 1, awe emotion was significantly associated with JS-Beneficiary($r=0.2$, $p<0.01$), but not significantly associated with JS-Victim.

Table 1. Correlation between awe, justice sensitivity, and consumption

	Study 1 (n=390)	Study 2 (n=215)	
	Awe	Awe	Joy
JS-Victim	0.03		
JS-Beneficiary	0.20**		
Offers in Dictator Game		0.15*	0.11
Brand Consumption		0.03	0.12**

Note. * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$. JS = Justice Sensitivity

As expected, individuals who experienced more awe emotion during the ordinary life, were more bothered by profit from others, but not by their own suffering. The results suggest that awe is more related with the others-concern but not the self -concern.

STUDY 2

On basis of the unique relation of awe to other-oriented but not self-oriented justice in the first study concerns, the second study focused on the effect of awe on other-oriented altruistic behavior and self-oriented consumption behavior.

Altruistic behavior defined as "behavior that benefits another organism, not closely related, while being apparently detrimental to the organism performing the behavior, benefit and detriment being defined in terms of contribution to inclusive fitness" (Trivers, 1971), is a typical other-oriented behavior. *Brand consumption* is a powerful social tool that consumers employ in their quest for self-identity, and also a symbolic resource to communicate the self to others.(Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998, Schembri *et al.*, 2010). As consumers employ product symbolism for their social interaction, conspicuous consumption does not only mean the ostentation of wealth, but also the ostentation of something symbolic to specific reference groups in order to gain their recognition or prestige(Chen, 2008). So, brand consumption could be considered as a typical self-oriented behavior. According to the previous researches, it could be supposed that awe might be positive related to altruistic behavior but not consumption.

To test whether the effect of awe was general in varies of positive emotions, another typical emotion, joy, was also concerned in Study 2. Joy, sometimes referred to as happiness, indicates the high-arousal emotion felt when the environment signals an imminent improvement in resources, and one must expend energy to acquire that reward. It is more self-oriented, which put the emphasis primarily on self-enhancement (just like pride, amusement) (Shiota *et al.*, 2006). Some researchers found that the above two positive emotions have relations with both altruism and consumption behaviors, but the results are not stable.

We hypothesized that: altruistic behaviors, the altruistic tendency in a dictator game, was uniquely predicted by dispositional awe but not by dispositional joy; Meanwhile, brand consumption attitudes should be uniquely predicted by dispositional joy but not by dispositional awe.

Method

Participants: Two hundred fifteen participants (114 female, aged from 18 to 24 years) took part in the second study in exchange for academic credit in social psychology, after providing their informed consent. Each student got extra credits for participating in this study.

Materials: Participants were requested to report their awe experience as in Study 1. Additionally, 6 items (e.g., "I often feel bursts of joy," "I am an intensely cheerful person," 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = 0.82$) was used to assess the emotion of joy (Shiota *et al.*, 2006). Higher scores reflected a stronger emotional experience of joy.

Aftermath, participants were requested to take part in a dictator game, instructed, "suppose now that you were provided with \$100 in cash and asked to propose a division of \$100 between yourself and an anonymous person, how much will you offer to the anonymous person" (Hoffman *et al.*, 1996); and to responded on the 18-items (e.g., "using famous brand products induces respect from others," "If people could afford it, only famous brand products would be bought," 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = 0.82$) about brand-product consumption (Marcoux *et al.*, 1997).

Results

As shown in Table 1, awe emotion ($r=0.15$, $p<0.05$), but not joy emotion, was significantly and positively associated with offers in Dictator Game; however, joy emotion ($r=0.12$, $p<0.01$), but not awe emotion, was significantly related to Brand Consumption.

As our hypothesis expected, individuals with more awe experience in their daily life were more likely to be generous to other persons, indicating the strong virtue of altruism. While the emotion of joy, considered as a self-oriented positive emotion, might enhance people's brand consumption preference.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Individuals who experience more awe emotion during the ordinary life, are more disturbed to take advantage from others but not sensitive to being traded unfairly by themselves (Study 1); and are more likely to be generous to strangers in a dictator game, while the ones who experience more joy emotion during the ordinary life reported more brand consumption preference (Study 2).

All the results from our two studies conformed our hypothesis: awe is a others-oriented emotions related to virtue and altruism, generally impacting on individuals' believes and behaviors.

The other-oriented property of awe can be attributed to its self-diminishing effects: included a feeling of smallness, being in the presence of something greater than the self, and being particularly attuned to and focused on their surroundings (Van Cappellen and Saroglou, 2012). So individuals with awe emotion will pay more attention to other people. Specifically, the “other people” here refers to the proximal others, such as general others in JS-Beneficiary (Study 1), and a stranger in the dictator game (Study 2). As a specific self-transcendent positive emotion, awe leads to inattention to one’s personal day-to-day concerns (Van Cappellen and Saroglou, 2012). It is epistemological and moral, but less related with intimate relationships, such as attachment (Shiota *et al.*, 2006).

Our studies provided a powerful evidence that the relation between awe and virtue should be bidirectional: awe could be a “other-praising” emotion arising from the perceived moral virtue of others (Haidt, 2003, Keltner and Haidt, 2003), and also can lead to moral beliefs and behaviors (as shown in the present studies). Some researchers described awe as one of the moral emotions, which function as proximate mechanisms for the moral motives by evaluating the social-relational potential of others, generating the desire to enter into social relationships with others, and regulating existing social relationships ((Rai and Fiske, 2011). On the other hand, the emotion of elevation (triggered by other people’s virtues, similar to awe) (Keltner and Haidt, 2003) is found a predictor of pro-social behavior (Schnall *et al.*, 2010). The present studies directly supported that emotional awe can lead to virtue. Despite the awe experience concerned in our studies were all about nature, cognition and aesthetic (see Dispositional Positive Awe Scale used in Study 1&2), the stable relations between awe and other-reoriented moral behavior were still found in both two studies. This confirmed that, awe is a stable, comprehensive emotion of morality (Keltner, 2003).

Additionally, the obvious distinction between awe and joy should be noticed: joy was uniquely positive related to brand consumption preference, while awe was uniquely related to altruism and virtue. Unlike awe with self-transcendence property, joy is a more self-focused emotion. Material rewards, personal successes, or pleasurable social interactions were often typically described as elicitors of “happiness” or “joy” (Shiota *et al.*, 2007). Although the relation between happiness and purchasing is widely noted, there is no stable conclusion yet. Link between consumption and subjective well-being was significant when nations are compared to each other, but not when individuals within a given nation are compared to each other. Individualistic cultures was considered as the mediating variable between consumption and SWB: it encourages social members who live in the richer societies to pursue personal happiness over honor and meeting social obligations (Ahuvia, 2002). Since then, the slight positive relation between joy and brand consumption preference, we got in a small sample size in China, should be explained very cautiously. The self-focus nature, hedonism and individualism in modern society could all be possible factors, but a more sufficient further study is necessary.

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