

Awe: A positive emotion, but tinged with sadness

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Awe is defined as the positive emotion elicited by vast stimuli such as natural landscapes, sunsets, or impressive pieces of art. However, awe is theorized to be a complex emotion, possibly combining positive with less positive components (Otto, 1970; see also Keltner, 2003). What these components are? To analyze the affective components of awe, we gathered data of five studies in which participants were asked to evaluate their affective states on the same each time 10-item scale. Data of 1168 participants (age: $M = 23.76$, $SD = 8.84$; 916 women; 96% Europeans) initially distributed in five studies ($n_1 = 269$, $n_2 = 127$, $n_3 = 170$, $n_4 = 392$, $n_5 = 210$) were gathered. Participants across studies were randomly assigned to one of several conditions, i.e. awe ($n = 326$), joy ($n = 229$), amusement ($n = 263$), or neutral ($n = 350$). In each condition, participants were asked to either recall a past experience or to watch a short video, designed to elicit the target emotion (i.e. awe, joy, or amusement) or no specific emotion (neutral). Afterwards they were asked to indicate how strongly they felt 10 affective states (awe, fascination, curiosity, sadness, amusement, joy, excitement, enthusiasm, pride, determination). Results showed that in the awe condition, participants experienced more awe, but also more fascination, curiosity, and interestingly more sadness, compared to joy, amusement, or neutral conditions, and this among both men and women. However, in the awe condition, the intensity with which participants felt each of these affective states depended on gender. Whereas after awe induction women reported to have felt awe and fascination more intensively than men, the latter reported more curiosity and determination than women. These results provide considerable insight into the possible complexity of the emotion of awe and its affective components, which also include a key negative component: sadness. Finally, though both men and women similarly experience awe as a specific emotion, i.e. different from other positive ones, they seem differently affected by its specific components.