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Wonder in the Eye of the Beholder, Rather than the Event

Erratum

Sponsored by Steve Derne

Wonder is in the Eye of the Beholder, Rather than the Event

Meagan Odette

sponsored by Steven Dorné

ABSTRACT

This study wishes to tackle some of the mystery of wonder. To do this, thirty open-ended interviews were conducted asking participants to describe their experiences with wonder. Results reveal that some who experience wonder will process the event internally, rather than placing that emotion on the object. This paper outlines the data and suggests further studies that could be conducted for this thesis.

Wonder has always been a mysterious emotion. The idea has been considered to be so abstract, that several scholars believe that people do not fully process wonder when they experience it. Vasalou (2012) states that people place their emotion of wonder on the event instead of recognizing the feeling internally. This study, however, neglects that people do recognize when they are experiencing wonder.

Considering thirty interviews that were conducted during Fall 2019, results suggest that most individuals do recognize when they are experiencing wonder. However, there are some problems with this acquisition that I address later on in the paper. I also provide some options for further study. While there are some complications, I believe this is a good starting point for more interesting research within this realm.

In Vasalou's "Wonder: Toward a Grammar," she states that people have "a tendency to draw emphasis away from the emotion [of wonder] as an experience, and channel it toward the object that excites it" (2012, p. 24). This happens because "wonder appears to register as a rather elusive presence to those who would seek to understand it" (Vasalou, 2012, p. 17). Due to this lack of comprehension, people tend to distance themselves when they experience wondrous events. This distance can be seen when people tend to attribute the sensation of wonder "to the object rather than an emotion ascribed in the first person to oneself" (Vasalou, 2012, p. 24). Whether consciously or not, people rarely consider wonder as an emotion they are feeling due to the confusion they feel from the event. Rather, they interpret wonder towards the event or an object, thus deflecting the emotion from themselves.

Vasalou provides further examples by noting how the statement, 'I wonder' is a grammatical anomaly in modern-day speech compared to common phrases like 'I'm scared' or 'I feel terrified.' I-statements are more commonly used towards other emotions like fear, but very rarely expressed with emotions of awe. Wonder is instead expressed through phrases like 'Wow!' or 'How wonderful!' Note how these phrases do not discuss any personal emotions; neither are they directed towards anything other than the object. This means that the viewer often interprets wonder only through an event. They also are not fully realizing that they are experiencing the emotion of wonder. However, I argue this is not the case due to our research.

For this study, thirty qualitative interviews were provided by students in a section of Sociology 476 during Fall 2019. Students each contacted two people they had close relationships with to be interviewed. Interviewees were asked about their experiences of wonder and how it affected them. Following questions included have you ever experienced wonder? How have you reflected on these moments of wonder? Can you describe a specific instance of wonder? Questions were a basic guideline for these interviews, but they were not mandatory to be asked. Rather the interviews were open-ended. These interviews were then analyzed to identify similar patterns with wonder.

After studying the data, I found that eleven out of thirty interviewees did use I-statements when discussing wonder. Examples of such phrases can be seen by Mr. Frank when he stated "I wonder at my luck to experience such a thing," or "I wonder at it every time." Others like Mr. Alexander also used the phrase, "I experience plenty of wonder." This goes against what Vasalou was saying. At least a third of the interviewees realized that they felt wonder and attributed that emotion to themselves.

There were also cases where wonder was directly placed towards themselves, rather than in the event. Six out of thirty interviewees found wonder in themselves. Mr. Baker found wonder in living eight years after he was diagnosed with ALS. Other people also found wonder in being alive, such as Ms. Gregory who described "realizing that [she] was alive...and was [then] overcome with joy." Ms. Young found wonder when she went "to a foreign country alone and came out with really good friends on the other side." Ms. Henderson also found wonder in having the ability to give her partner sexual pleasure. She described it as making her feel "powerful." All of these instances are important to note because it shows that not only are these participants acknowledging that they are processing wonder, but they are also finding the origin of their wonder internally. This seems to be a whole other tier of agency in wonder that Vasalou did not explore.

It is also interesting to note that some people were not completely detached from the meaning of the experiences as well. This disproves Vasalou's belief that wondrous events are too elusive for people to comprehend. Mr. Parker describes how he viewed a bird pooping on his car on the anniversary of his friend's death. As Mr. Parker described it: "That was [him] fucking with me. I know it. He's still got that sense of humor." For Mr. Parker, while the initial event was shocking, he was able to compre-

hend the event afterward as a sign from his deceased friend. Mr. Parker shows no sign of confusion or ambiguity about the event anymore. This decision also does not lessen the sense of wonder for the interviewee.

There were certain limitations in this study. The first problem being the validity of the study. Validity describes how well the measure describes the concept. Due to the data coming from qualitative open-ended interviews, the determination of validity and variables falls onto the researcher, which is a flaw in itself. One could interpret that I am biased to look for the answers that work for me, so the outcome is more skewed than truthful. In terms of what there is to look for, there was no correct answer to focus on. As you can tell above, I looked at various variables that I thought disproved Vasalou's statement. This includes looking for when interviewees directly used I-statements in their testimony. However, I also determined that looking for instances where people got wonder from themselves also proved my statement. I determined these variables to be important, however, other people may not disagree. Others may also claim that I could look for other variables to prove my thesis.

Another problem in terms of validity is that the interviews were not focused on the variables I deemed important. This round of interviews was more so meant to get a starting point on the topic of wonder. This leads to the interviews being more vague rather than focused on my topic. In an interview that focuses on the variables I discussed before, there would be more data for me to study. So these interviews do not fully exhaust the capability of my thesis. There were also other problems related to validity in that the interviewees could have forgotten their experiences of wonder, which is a loss of data to study. Others may also not be comfortable to share these moments of wonder with the interviewer.

There is also a problem in terms of representativeness in the interviews. Representativeness describes if the data represents the population, which again helps maintain the validity of the research. Interviewees were personally contacted by interviewers, so interviews weren't conducted ensuring that they were representative of the population. This denies our research from reaching those who are not within the social pool of the interviewers. This in turn can affect our prevalence in our research. Prevalence is the amount of results proven during research. As I said before, validity and representativeness are both lacking in this study for my topic, and so this in turn hurts my prevalence. While some research proves my thesis, there needs to be more research done with a larger pool base and more focused variables to confirm my topic.

For further research, I would also recommend sending out a survey to a larger sample size in the general population. The questions in the survey should pursue the variables I have studied earlier. While I did find some interesting results, the numbers just were not there. It may be beneficial to see if these variables have weight in the population, or if they were just independent coincidences. If there were no statistical significance in these variables outside of the first interviews, then there would be no point in studying it further. This would also be a good place to see if the variables I studied previ-

ously were worth considering for the next round of open-ended interviews. However, it also may be smart to think about other variables of agency in wonder.

Questions in the survey include: Can you think of an instance where you found wonder in a person, or yourself? Do you think it is possible to feel wonder? The variables I am most concerned about are the more interpretive and rare ones, which may prove to be harder to calculate in a quantitative method. However, maybe placing examples beforehand will help people open up more. Such as paraphrasing Mr. Parker's experience and then asking survey takers if they have faced similar circumstances. Thus, it may be beneficial to allow a space after questions and answers for survey takers to explain their answers further.

At this point, it may be clear to see that I highly emphasize another round of open-ended interviews for this thesis. Specifically interviews with a greater focus on examples of personal agency in wonder. While I believe what I have done already is a good start, it is more interpretation than solid proof. The surveys will provide the numbers to prove that the thesis is noticeable in the population. However, the interviews will provide more focused answers and more definitive results. Questions could ask interviewees the survey questions while probing for further information. Questions could follow in the form of: Can you think of an instance where you found wonder in a person, or even yourself? Can you explain further? How important do you think personal reflection is with events of wonder? Do you have an example? I would still recommend the open-ended and fluid structure we exhibited in our first round of interviews, since through interviews. One could find even more variables to study and pursue. It would not benefit anyone to limit both the interviewer and interviewee of paths to follow.

After studying thirty interviews, I hoped to find evidence that people do not distance themselves from wondrous events, such as Vasalou stated. To do this, I searched for instances where people used I-statements to describe their experiences and announce they were actively feeling at the moment. I also described instances where wonder was not reserved only to the event, but rather within themselves. While I am proud of the work I have done thus far, there are still problems in terms of validity and representation in the data. I suggest further research for more focused questions in both surveys and open-ended interviews. However, I do think this is an interesting topic to continue researching.

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