

# Awe and Prosocial Behavior

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Although awe has been shown to increase prosocial behavior, there is limited knowledge about the mechanisms underlying this relationship, and about this relationship during unique periods. Awe can significantly positively predict prosocial behavior and can also indirectly predict prosocial behavior through the presence of meaning in life. These associations are moderated by the perceived social support. Specifically, the positive relationship between awe and the presence of meaning in life was only significant for college students with low perceived social support and the positive relationship between the presence of meaning in life and prosocial behavior was stronger for college students with high perceived social support.

Keywords: awe ; prosocial behavior ; presence of meaning in life

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## 1. Introduction

Major disaster events and ongoing pandemics can have important social, psychological, and health effects on individuals. Such outcomes in the face of COVID-19, including in college students, are yet to be fully understood. Prosocial behaviors include overt actions intended to benefit others <sup>[1]</sup>. They are important because prosocial behaviors such as cooperating, sharing, donating, and helping others contribute to social harmony <sup>[2]</sup> and afford the human race to thrive <sup>[3]</sup>.

Given its importance, researchers have studied various correlates of prosocial behavior, including attributes of the helper and the recipient, situational factors, and sociocultural factors. For example, a study of children and adolescents found that prosocial behavior is associated with positive emotions <sup>[4]</sup>. Such positive emotional states remind participants of positive experiences and encourage similar actions in the future, such as prosocial behavior <sup>[5]</sup>. This is in line with the social outlook model, which suggests that positive emotions lead to more positive social cognition, which in turn leads to greater attention to prosocial behavior <sup>[6]</sup>.

Awe is an important positive emotion disposition <sup>[7]</sup>. It is often conceptualized as the emotional experience of an individual in the face of a vast, powerful stimulus that goes beyond the existing cognitive framework <sup>[8]</sup>. It is also an important driver of prosocial behavior: the induction of awe, compared to the induction of amusement or a neutral condition, leads to increased prosocial behavioral intentions of generosity and helping a person in need <sup>[9]</sup>.

## 2. Awe and Prosocial Behavior

Awe is a complex emotion that encapsulates many feelings such as confusion, admiration, surprise, and obedience. Its importance stems from the fact that it has a range of positive effects on individuals, leading to less self-concern and more prosocial behavior <sup>[9][10]</sup>. The induction of awe has been supported to lead to more prosocial behavior than other more frequently studied varieties of positive emotions. With awe, individuals will feel small, focus on something greater than the self, forget daily concerns, have a close connection with the surrounding world, and hope to prolong or memorize the experience <sup>[7]</sup>. The subjective experience of awe is consistent with the notion of self-transcendence <sup>[11]</sup>, and it is fundamentally out of concern to enhance the welfare of others, thus promoting prosocial behavior <sup>[12]</sup>. Studies have reported that awe can significantly and positively influence prosocial behavior tendency and online altruism <sup>[13]</sup>.

## 3. Presence of Meaning in Life as a Mediator

The presence of meaning in life refers to the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see the significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life <sup>[14]</sup>.

The reason is that firstly, awe can enhance an individual's presence of meaning in life. Indeed, an individual's positive emotion has a significant positive correlation with meaning in life <sup>[15]</sup>, and especially with the presence of meaning in life

[16]. This happens because individuals with higher positive emotions are usually more likely to experience a higher level of meaning in life. Awe, as a kind of self-transcendent positive emotion, has also been supported to promote meaning in life. Using video to initiate awe, the study found that awe can induce a positive feeling and ultimately increase meaning in life [17].

Second, the presence of meaning in life can positively influence prosocial behavior [18]. The higher level of meaning in life, the better life satisfaction, less psychological distress and negative emotions, and more prosocial behavior [19]. This association is rooted in self-determination theory, which postulates that people with a higher meaning in life, driven by their own goals, missions, and tasks, have stronger intrinsic motivations for prosocial behaviors, and will engage in prosocial behaviors autonomously and voluntarily [20].

Thus, it is possible that awe, which is accompanied by a strong emotional experience of self-transcendence that enables individuals to pursue spirituality, can increase the sense of meaning in life in individuals [9][21][22]. Furthermore, a strong meaning in life can encourage individuals to pay more attention to the current difficulties and needs of others [23] and through this, also promote social activities that transcend the meaning in life [24], such as spiritual satisfaction by helping others or engaging in charity. Indeed, dispositional awe, which is a personality trait that is stable across time and situation, can not only directly influence prosocial behavior but can indirectly influence prosocial behavior by enhancing self-transcendence meaning in life [25]. Lin reveals the mediating role of self-transcendent meaning in life between dispositional awe and prosocial behavior in his research but argues that longitudinal study may be more convincing [26].

## **4. Perceived Social Support as a Moderator**

Awe can be significantly related to prosocial behavior through the mediator of the presence of meaning in life, but not all individuals being in awe will equally follow this process and engage in more prosocial behavior. Therefore, it is important to explore those factors that may moderate the strength of the relationships among awe, the presence of meaning in life, and prosocial behavior.

Researchers argue that perceived social support can moderate the effect of awe on the presence of meaning in life. Studies shows that the more social support individuals get from family and friends, the higher meaning in life they will have [27]. Emotion has been reported to associate with social support [28]. Greater social support was associated with lower levels of loneliness overall, but the receipt of social support did not modify one's expression of loneliness over time [29]. Awe, as a kind of positive emotion [7], might also be associated with perceived social support. Importantly, awe has complicated effects on meaning in life [17]. Many awe experiences may contain a positive flavor, which contributes to awe and generally positive emotions, thus having a positive impact on meaning in life [17]. At the same time, however, awe experiences lead to a diminished self that reflects feelings of smallness and insignificance, which might negatively influence meaning [17]. These complicated effects may suggest a potential moderating mechanism [17]. Perceived social support is a protective factor that reduces the sensitivity of meaning in life to negative predictors and increases the effect of positive predictors [17][27][30].

The direction of moderation, though, is not clear. On the one hand, the protective-enhancing hypothesis maintains that different protective factors interact to affect the development of individuals and that one protective factor (i.e., perceived social support) will enhance the function of the other protective factor (i.e., awe) [31][32]. Due to this hypothesis, rather than low levels of perceived social support, the promoting effect of awe on the presence of meaning in life would be stronger for people with high perceived social support, implying that interventions aimed at improving awe would be particularly beneficial for people who score high in perceived social support. On the other hand, the protective-attenuating hypothesis holds that one protective factor usually takes advantage and this beneficial impact is especially potent when individuals possess low levels of another protective factor [31][33]. According to this perspective, the promoting effect of awe on the presence of meaning in life would be stronger for people with low rather than high levels of perceived social support, suggesting that interventions seeking to increase awe would be more effective for people who possess low perceived social support. Considering that the absence of empirical studies makes it impossible for people to infer clearly which hypothesis will hold.

Furthermore, perceived social support serves as an important environmental factor that may moderate the effect of the presence of meaning on prosocial behavior. With the rise of ecological systems theory, researchers have realized that individual development is the result of the interaction between individual characteristics and environmental factors. The individual-environment interaction model suggests that an individual's behavior is formed and developed through the interaction between the individual and the environment, and individual factors interact with environmental factors to affect

individual development <sup>[34]</sup>. Consequently, perceived social support, as an environmental factor <sup>[35]</sup> may interact with the presence of meaning in life, thus affecting the individual behavior choices. Such mechanisms are not yet fully understood.

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