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VCU

Aesthetic Chills: An Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this poster is to describe autoethnographic research that recorded experiences of aesthetic chills. Aesthetic chills, also known as piloerection, are a psychophysiological response to stimuli that create pilo-erection and a “chill” effect on the body not related to temperature (i.e. goosebumps due to experiences of beauty). For the last three years, the researcher has made a written record of each instance of his experience of an aesthetic chill and the circumstances that triggered the chill. The data consists of brief descriptions of the triggering event, the date the chill occurred. Some descriptions also include the location where the chills were experienced on the body (i.e. back of the neck) as well as the intensity of that chill (mild, intense, pulsar). The encounters have been analyzed for similarities in conditions and given a number in numerical order of the date it was recorded. This research has provided both quantitative and qualitative data to analyze for the purpose of understanding more about the how frequently and under what thematic categories the aesthetic chills occur for this researcher.

Methodology

According to Denzin (2008) analytic autoethnography has five key features. It is ethnographic work in which: (a)The researcher “is a full member in a research group or setting” meaning that the researcher is also the participant (b) The researcher “uses analytic reflexivity;” the researcher is researching one’s own experience and has decided in advance how to capture that experience. (c) The researcher “has a visible narrative presence in the written text.” That is, the data is a record of the researchers experience and contains one’s personal knowledge. (d) The researcher “engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self.” The data is to be shared with other researchers of the topic and his research team. e) Researcher “is committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.” The research is intended to answer questions about whether recording aesthetic chills increases one’s sensitivity to them and thus increases their frequency.

Dr. Bargdill is the autoethnographer since he is both author and focus of the research. He is the one who narrates his experiences as the observer and the observed. By being able to incorporate himself into the research, he is able to tie together the personal aspect of the culture, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and both the writing and describing as a storyteller and researcher.

Works Cited

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Introduction

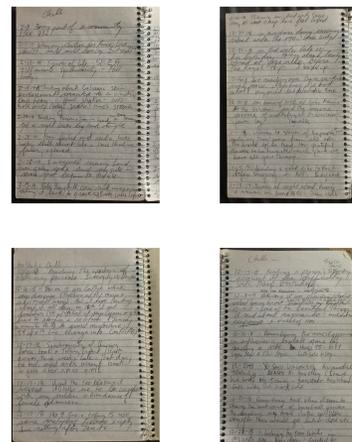
Aesthetic chills are a valuable indicator of being moved according to Benedek and Kaernbach (2011, pg. 320-329). They suggest music, and films were the most common stimulus in piloerection. Scholler, however, hypothesized that piloerection is a simple human response to understanding, to acquiring knowledge about the world and to perceiving objects and situations as *meaningful* (2015). Scholler also concluded that chills are most likely elicited when we either encounter situations where we understand ourselves better or ones that puzzles us. We’re more likely to endure piloerection when we feel that our views and morals align in the outside world, thus feel a sense of belonging. Our data shows distinct patterns in areas of deep emotional connection with the researcher and his outside world.

Although aesthetic chills are closely related to ASMR, some researchers suggest there are distinct differences between the two. According to Poerio (2018), ASMR is an autonomous sensory meridian response which is described as having similar effects to a chill. Although both aesthetic chills, and ASMR are provoked by emotional stimuli, and emit a similar chill response, the two provide to very different physiological reactions. Aesthetic chills are more so associated with excitement and arousal, producing an increase in heart rate. ASMR on the other hand, is associated with calming, relaxation and a lower heart rate. Similar to aesthetic chills, ASMR is also induced by triggers unique to the individual experiencing them (Fredborg, 2017). Fredborg found a reliable correlation between specific personality traits (e.g. Openness) and their ability to experience ASMR and it’s frequencies. Both ASMR and aesthetic chills are considered to be a sensory-emotional phenomenon that provides a strong indicator of people who could potentially benefit from psychotherapy since therapy requires a sense of openness.

Supporting Images

Aesthetic Chills Experiences									
on Chart	Types								
	Profound Reading Material	Enlightened Insightfulness	Bliss	Negative Stimuli/Uncanniness	Music	Video	Connectedness/Physical Touch	Giving/Gratitude	Coincidence/Synchronicity
60	8	1	5	11	16	2	3	6	
62	10	14	24	13	56	9	4	7	
63	12	27	43	19	97	20	15	44	
113	17	39	47	23	98	50	22	61	
114	18	166	25	102	28	34	67		
118	21	167	29	105	77	40	69		
119	26	168	32	144	94	68	80		
120	30		33		88	76	128		
135	31		35		96	82	158		
136	36		41		100	85	162		
148	37		46		106	86	170		
	42		70		107	87			
	42		45		91	109	92		
	48		104		112	93			
	49		115		129	108			
	51		132		134	110			
	52				138	117			

- 114. May 15th 2019: Dao says as long as we respond to outer pressure with our egos by worrying desiring or becoming aggressive” - enlightenment
- 115. May 16th 2019: He feels he can sing, one song “person and son” he loves
- 116. May 16th 2019: Feeling of chi “life force”
- 117. May 22nd 2019: Talking about dreams in a class, expressed how they are messages within.
- 118. May 24th 2019: Thanking the Dao for a successful event the night before with art and music. Was very stressful but ended up being a success. Reminds you to be humble with success
- 119. May 24th 2019: Dao reading was joyous and gave him tingles
- 120. May 24th 2019: When he read further down on the same Dao “Joyous”, joy and success cannot be taken from you
- 121. May 24th 2019: Had to teach about dreams, telling his own dream about an astronaut that allowed him to realize he needed to help someone in need (poet) (touched)
- 122. May 24th 2019: Listening to other people talk about dreams, and analyzing for them.
- 123. June 1st 2019: He gave gratitude to the gods for what they have given him and what more that could come his way
- 124. June 3 2019: Teaching Hermeneutics and using coats of paint as a metaphor, the circle being that the wall of paint needs another coat and the goal of any endeavor is that you keep going over the wall until it looks good.
- 125. June 4th 2019: Teaching about thinking, thanking and dwelling. The room was cold, was telling a story that in German those three words have the same word (dankshane is the word I think you’re looking for)



Results/Discussion

The data was sorted into nine distinct categories according to the activity that stimulated the original chill, as recorded by the researcher. These nine categories consisted of: profound reading material, moments of enlightened insightfulness, experiences of bliss, negative stimuli/uncanniness, responses to music, emotional reactions to video, connectedness/physical touch, giving/gratitude, coincidence/synchronicity. The categories were created based on the similarities that multiple chills shared. The researcher experienced a chill specifically when reading profound material that provoked an insightful thought. For moments of enlightened insightfulness, the researcher experienced an aesthetic chill due to his own thoughts and ideas; there were no external stimuli. Insightfulness was also recognized for moments of profound self-discovery. Moments that were recognized as happiness, enjoying simplicity, embracing beauty in everyday life, were categorized as experiences as bliss. Negative stimuli/uncanniness were categorized by any negative stimuli; ideas, thoughts, sights, fear, sadness, anything that provoked a negative or surreal emotion. Any musical stimulus, songs, singing, listening to music that elicited an aesthetic chill was categorized into the music section. Moving pictures, films, videos, were all categorized into video. Family experiences, feeling a bond between people, feeling love and expressing closeness with others was categorized into the connectedness/ physical touch category. Any chill that was a response to physical touch also resided into the connectedness/ physical touch category. Giving/gratitude was categorized by giving or receiving something of value. Teaching, learning, accepting a gift, or being able to give back was all considered to fall into this category for being similar in nature. Our last category was the category of coincidence/synchronicity, stimuli that elicited aesthetic chills that were hard to explain, or moments in time that seemed to be choreographed perfectly, were categorized as coincidence/synchronicity.

For the first year, the researcher experienced 51 chills in 12 months/52 weeks averaging about a chill a week. The second year the researcher experienced 75 chills in 12 months/52 weeks averaging 1.44 chills a week. Finally, for the third year the researcher experienced 45 aesthetic chills in 11 months, for a total of 170 recorded chills over three years. Frequently on days were the researcher experienced one chill, there was a higher chance of experiencing a “pulsar chill,” or additional chill, so that chills appeared to seem to happen in clusters on the same days. Sometimes the initial chill produced a repeat chill like an aftershock from the same stimulus. In other words, the stimulus was so profound it created a wave effect. The most chills the researcher experienced on one day was 9 aesthetic chills. The data showed a gap in aesthetic chill recordings from October 2018-November 2018, which could be accounted for by external factors, forgetting to record the researcher’s experiences, strenuous activities, disruption in routine. December of 2018 was the month that accounted for the most aesthetic chills at 21 events, and 68 enlightenment experiences

Conclusion

Piloerection is not a chaotic and random phenomenon but is controlled by specific triggers. According to the Benedek and Kaernbach (2015), music was the easiest way to elicit aesthetic chills in the general population, our research suggests that there are many other categories of experiences that produce aesthetic chills. We found nine distinct experiences with music being one of them, however, music was not the category with the most frequent experiences for this particular researcher. In fact, the following three categories had more chill provoking events than music: connectedness/physical touch, giving/receiving, moments of enlightened insightfulness. We did find initially a substantial increase in the numbers recorded in the second year with a total of almost 1.5 chills per week as compared to .98 chills per week in the first year. The data for the third year was not complete, but currently is on track to be greater than one experience a week. Future researchers could ask participants to think back on a profound piece of wisdom, a moment of deep gratitude or an experience of intense belongingness in order to elicit an emotional aesthetic chill response.