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Jessica Turner

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Aesthetic Chills: An Autoethnographic Study
Jessica Turner and Richard Bargdill, PhD
Psychology Department of Humanities and Sciences

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 acting” 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.

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/uncomfort, responses to music, emotional reactions to videos, 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 provided 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 of bliss. Negative stimuli/uncomfort 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. Movies, 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 144 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 the researcher taking time off 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.

Supporting Images

Works Cited


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 factors and 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 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.