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Amanda Vick
SUNY Geneseo

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Within the Known: Wonder That Comes From Understanding

Erratum

Sponsored by Steve Derne

Within the Known: Wonder That Comes from Understanding

Amanda Vick

sponsored by Steven Dorné

ABSTRACT

Peter Marchand claims that understanding is contradictory to wonder, describing only two Sub-Rasas of the Adbhuta Rasa (the Rasa of Wonder). The first Sub-Rasa includes wonder that occurs when there is a lack of understanding of an experience that could be understood. The second Sub-Rasa comes from not understanding experiences that cannot be understood. Marchand fails to discuss the possibility of understanding leading to or supporting experiences of wonder. He even suggests that when understanding is obtained, previously experienced wonder is greatly diminished. To explore the concept of wonder, thirty interviews were conducted by fifteen students in the SUNY Geneseo SOCL 476. Each subject was interviewed about their experiences with wonder, enchantment, and surprise, and asked about how those experiences affected them. The findings from this study confirm that people experience wonder from a lack of understanding, but that they can experience wonder from understanding as well.

Wonder is a largely unexplored phenomenon in sociology. Some scholars have claimed that due to technology, bureaucracy, and scientific thinking, our lives have become disenchanting and lacking wonder. Other scholars believe we still experience wonder, but that it is limited in certain ways and that there are barriers to this experience. Peter Marchand says that there are only two types of wonder, wonder that occurs when one does not understand something but know it is understandable, or when one does not understand something and know it cannot be understood. Marchand misses the possibility of experiences of wonder that result or are supported by understanding and our interviews suggest that this experience of wonder is possible.

LITERATURE

Marchand writes about the basis of wonder and its Sub-Rasas. According to Marchand, “wonder comes when we recognize our own ignorance” (2006, p. 55). This meaning that wonder occurs when we can acknowledge that not everything can be understood. Marchand (2006) describes this experience as the ego surrendering and therefore allow-

ing wonder to take over. He describes life as needing mystery and opportunity for learning to be wonderful. According to Marchand, “the moment we know what is happening and how, the Adbhuta Rasa disappears” (2006, p. 56). The Adbhuta Rasa is the Rasa of wonder. Therefore, Marchand claims that knowledge or understanding diminishes wonder to the point of extinction.

Marchand (2006) writes that there are two different Sub-Rasas of wonder. The first comes when we have an experience that we do not understand. However, we know that the experience *could* be rationally understood (Marchand, 2006). The second Sub-Rasa occurs when an experience is not understood and there is an expectation to be able to understand it. This second type of wonder is thought to be much stronger than the first as it completely subdues the ego (Marchand, 2006). According to Marchand, the more the ego is subdued, the greater an experience of wonder can be. The ego is the part of us that attempts to understand everything and is threatened by a lack of understanding. It is for this reason that the Rasa of Fear is friendly to the Adbhuta Rasa. As Marchand writes, “that which we do not understand always becomes a little fearsome” (2006, p. 58). Both Fear and Adbhuta Rasa’s work to subdue the ego. To master wonder and completely subdue the ego, Marchand (2006) writes that one must keep an open mind towards a lack of understanding. In fact, he suggests that to reach the highest Wonder Sadhana, one must “completely refrain from the idea of understanding anything” (Marchand, 2006, p. 60). Understanding only serves to diminish wonder and feed the ego. On the other hand, Wonder is helpful to the Rasa of Joy and Marchand (2006) writes that Joy is the Rasa most often produced through Wonder.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study comes from a collection of thirty interviews conducted by the fifteen students in SUNY Geneseo’s Sociology 476 senior seminar class. Each student in the class conducted two interviews with people they knew about wonder, enchantment, and surprise. Of the thirty interviews, seventeen were male and thirteen were female. Twelve of the participants were categorized as college aged (ages 19-20); seven were between ages 23 and 26; seven were between the ages of 51 and 60; and four were of retirement age (ages 61-74). Students were instructed beforehand on how to protect human subjects when interviewing and made sure to get informed consent from all interview subjects. They agreed to be recorded and were told the recordings would be destroyed after they were transcribed. Subjects were also informed that the transcripts of their interviews would be distributed to the senior seminar class and could be used in writings by students or the professor. Any identifying information was removed from the transcripts before they were distributed to the class.

The interviews started with a background statement that stated some scholars believe that the world has become disenchanted, but that our professor believes people still experience wonder today. Interview subjects were asked, “Have you ever experienced wonder, enchantment, or surprise in your life? Or maybe your life has always been

disenchanted, dull, and predictable?” In response to this question, subjects were asked to describe an experience of wonder, enchantment, or surprise they faced in their lives. Students were provided with certain open-ended follow-up questions which included asking how they responded to the experience, did they reflect on the experience afterwards, and if the experience changed how they think or live. Subjects could provide as many examples as they wanted and were free to terminate the interview at any point.

When analyzing these interviews, I looked for evidence of understanding and its effect on wonder. I specifically looked for the words understand, knowledge, or learning. I also looked at the subject’s descriptions of their experiences of wonder and whether it included a lack of understanding, an experience of learning, or the presence of understanding their experience. Doing this I was able to find several examples to support both the Sub-Rasas that Marchand (2006) discussed, as well as my suggested third Sub-Rasa.

FINDINGS

The First Sub-Rasa

As Marchand (2006) suggests, understanding was seen to diminish wonder for some subjects. When reflecting on an experience of wonder during Independence Day, Mr. Frederick was asked why he thought that experience led to feelings of wonder. In response, Mr. Frederick discussed his wonder at the concept of fireworks as he was young and did not yet understand them. This is an example of the first Sub-Rasa of wonder in which something is not understood, but it could be. Mr. Frederick says, “I think that if you understand things better, there is less wonder and surprise.” This statement supports Marchand’s description of the first Sub-Rasa and his theory that understanding acts to decrease wonder.

This Sub-Rasa is also supported by Mr. Alexander’s description of wonder as he said, “wonder is that thing a child has before they learn something.” This statement suggests that wonder is found in things that are not understood at the time but can be understood in the future. This is an idea that is echoed by Mr. Culberson who, like Marchand (2006), stressed the importance of mystery in the experience of wonder. When asked about the effect taking away that mystery would have on his experience of wonder he responded, “I guess it would kind of ruin it.” The wonder of his experience was that it was not understood, despite the fact that it could have been. He supports the idea that understanding would destroy the wonder and enchantment of his experience.

The Second Sub-Rasa

The second Sub-Rasa of wonder, which comes from not understanding that which cannot be understood, was also experienced by some subjects. When asked about what wonder means, Mr. Alexander responded, “Just the unexplainable, joy and fas-

ination.” He goes on to discuss spirituality and human energy as sources of wonder that cannot be explained by science, therefore finding wonder in not understanding this that escapes human understanding. Additionally, both Ms. Henderson and Ms. Domhoff discussed experiences of wonder that had to do with the death of a loved one. Although both note the experience was tragic, they found wonder in the lack of understanding about death and the afterlife, something which cannot be understood. Ms. Henderson said, “It’s a natural part of living, but there’s so much not known about it.” The absence of understanding allowed for the ego to be subdued and wonder to be experienced.

A Third Sub-Rasa

The third aspect of wonder that Marchand (2006) neglects to look at is when understanding actually produces or supports an experience of wonder. When asked about an experience of wonder, Mr. Davis described the experience of gaining an understanding in class. He said, “In class when certain things click when you are trying to understand something When everything kind of clicks together kind of is a moment of wonder.” This experience counters Marchand’s (2006) claim that understanding only works to decrease wonder. In this case, it was the experience of learning and gaining the understanding of the class concept that allowed Mr. Davis to experience wonder. Mr. Davis also noted that this experience led him to feel “happy” and in a “good mood,” descriptions that reflect feelings of joy, the Rasa produced through wonder.

When asked about her definition of wonder, Ms. Henderson also discussed understanding. She described wonder as “the process of figuring it out.” Contrary to Marchand’s (2006) reasoning that we must stop trying to understand things in order to experience wonder, this statement points to looking for understanding as a source of wonder. Mr. Keller also gave a similar description when asked about what wonder means to him saying, “That’s not knowing the unknown to me. And wanting to know what it is.” He again looks to the process of looking for understanding and trying to fulfill curiosity as the experience of wonder, rather than the antithesis of it.

When reflecting on his experience of wonder and enchantment, Mr. Parker rejects the idea that understanding diminishes wonder. In his experience, he saw someone wearing a shirt on an anniversary date that had to do with that shirt. At the time this was a wild coincidence that could not be understood or explained. However, Mr. Parker mentions that a logical explanation was later found. His initial experience reflects the first Sub-Rasa as it was an event that was not understood but that an understanding could be found for. When specifically asked if his wonder disappeared however, Mr. Parker responded, “no, not really.” Meanwhile, Marchand (2006) would claim that finding the understanding and explanation for this occurrence would make the wonder disappear.

LIMITATIONS

The data collected for this study has certain limitations in its representativeness, validity, and ability to determine prevalence. Firstly, the subjects chosen to be interviewed were selected by the student interviewers as people who were likely to talk about wonder. It is possible that there might be less instances of wonder discussed by a random sample of subjects rather than a convenience sample. Additionally, the data consists of only thirty interviews, a small sample from which to draw conclusions from. Furthermore, this sample was not designed to be representative of the population of interest. For example, we had no interview subjects between the ages of 27 and 50, leaving a large gap of subjects unaccounted for who could have different experiences of wonder.

The validity of this study could be low due to researcher subjectivity as the questions were not designed to capture the subject's ideas about understanding, so the quotes from interview subjects had to be interpreted to some extent. Therefore, it cannot be certain that the information drawn from the interviews truly means what I interpreted it to. Some barriers to validity for this study came from a possible lack of frankness by subjects or an unwillingness to tell about certain experiences of wonder. Reactivity is also a concern as interview subjects could have tailored their responses to what they thought the interviewers wanted to hear.

Finally, the prevalence of these different experiences of wonder cannot be known as the interview questions were open ended and all the information was volunteered by the subjects. Without specifically asking about understanding during the interview, there is no way of knowing if the subject had no experience of wonder intersecting with understanding, or if they simply did not mention it in their volunteered answers.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

For future research, conducting this study with another sample that was designed to be representative of the population would help increase representativeness of the data. Furthermore, getting a sample of randomly selected individuals would increase representativeness as well.

Using another method of data collection such as a survey or an interview with more direct questions about understanding and wonder would be helpful. Both would increase validity as direct questions would make it clear what the subject is referencing in their answer. Less interpretation of their quotes would be needed. These other methods could also give an idea of the prevalence of different experiences of wonder and understanding as it could be directly asked about, rather than relying on subjects to volunteer that information or not.

It would be interesting in further research to analyze the education level of those who have different experiences of wonder and understanding to see if there is any correlation. Could having a higher level of education or an education profession lead people to find wonder more in understanding than in a lack of understanding? I would

also be interested to see if religiosity has any effect on the link between wonder and understanding. Many religions stress the idea of not understanding everything but putting faith in a higher power so that understanding is not necessary. Would being raised with this mentality make people less likely to seek understanding of wonderful experiences?

After analyzing the data from this study, it seems reasonable to conclude that understanding can contribute to wonder in ways that Marchand (2006) did not suggest. Although he claimed that understanding is contradictory to wonder, interview data collected by fifteen sociology students shows that understanding can be a source of and support for wonder. Future research would need to be done to address issues of representativeness and validity of this study and to enable any claim about prevalence of this sort of relationship between understanding and experiences of wonder.

REFERENCES

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