

AESTHETIC RESPONSIVENESS AS MENTAL RESOURCE: PERSONALITY TRAIT MODELS AND MEASUREMENT¹

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Mental resources and aesthetics. When we are speaking about mental resources in the field of aesthetics, three issues come to mind. The first major issue is artistic and aesthetic abilities. Artistic talent including special abilities (musical, drawing, literary etc.) is closely associated with creativity and serves successful scenic or other artistic production, while aesthetic abilities concern rather aesthetic perception and allow making judgments or preferences in accordance with aesthetic merit of an object. There is a long tradition of studying individual differences in both of these psychological qualities as well as of debating on their nature.

Namely, there are more elementary approach to artistic abilities versus more holistic one. For example, in the field of music, these approaches manifested themselves respectively in a set of elementary abilities from the classical C. Seashore's Measures of Musical Talent tests, and in an early study of musical prodigy E. Nyiregyházi by G. Révész. B. Teplov proposed an alternative to these two approaches by describing musical giftedness as a psychological functional system comprising three specific musical abilities: modal sense, sense of rhythm, and musical representations. Later E. Gordon developed the Musical Aptitude Profile consisting of tests of tonal and rhythmic imagery, and musical sensitivity.

Aesthetic *abilities* in turn may be thought and measured in four distinct ways: as sensitivity to an object's beauty and excellence (i.e. "good taste"); as sensibility to an object's expressive qualities; as ability to make use of these qualities; as individual preferences' criteria succeeding in the developmental perspective (see Сабадош, 2014). In all cases, they remain abilities, i.e. factors of aesthetic achievement, of production/perception's goodness or rightness judged by some external standard.

The second issue in this field is aesthetic *competence* including art related knowledge and skills which enables the individual to better produce and perceive aesthetic objects. There are some achievement tests assessing aesthetic competence, mostly in the frame of art education. J.K. Smith and L. Smith coined the term "aesthetic fluency" for art knowledge base facilitating aesthetic experience and proposed the Aesthetic fluency scale for its measuring.

The third issue deals with *motivational characteristics* such as personal aesthetic values, interests, dispositions. In 1960 G. Allport, P. Vernon and G. Lindzey constructed a scale measuring value orientation based on the earlier Spranger's theory of personality types, including the aesthetic one. M. Rokeach in the 1970s and later Sh. Schwartz in the 1990s developed other general measures of value orientation, comprising aesthetic values among others. Lastly, Lundy (Lundy et al., 2010) proposed the specialized Desire For

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Aesthetic Scale measuring interest for aesthetics in everyday life. Aesthetic value orientation, although not operationalized in terms of achievements, however obviously contributes to successful aesthetic activity, value orientation scales being widely used in vocational consulting.

In contrast with these three issues, aesthetic *responsiveness* in the form of appreciation or engagement is not directly related to artistic success nor other aesthetic achievement — it is just a measure of how much and how often an individual has aesthetic experiences. Thus, aesthetic responsiveness is a personal trait and, like aesthetic motivation, it can be measured mainly by the method of self-report. The first such standardized scale appeared relatively late: it was a subscale Openness to aesthetics of the scale Openness in the NEO Big Five personality inventory by P. Costa and R. McCrae.

Why aesthetic responsiveness is a mental resource? The term resource assumes usefulness of some actual quality, its contribution to an activity's effectiveness, to coping with difficulties and finally to survival. Thus, abilities are resource by definition, motivational characteristics and competence being tightly interrelated with abilities and considered as effectiveness factors too. Though some personal traits are treated as resources (see Хазова, 2014 for review), there is a question of what is the resource function of aesthetic responsiveness, i.e. for what aesthetic experiences are useful.

Recently I have distinguished five theoretical approaches to aesthetic experiences' resource function: evolutionary, psychophysical, intuitionist, psychodynamic, existential (Sabadosh, 2015). In all these approaches aesthetic experiences are thought as a resource not of particular goal-directed activity but of more comprehensive life processes lying mostly outside consciousness, that make it very special and different from many other kinds of mental resources.

Evolutionary approach treats aesthetic experiences as a resource of species adaptation. Representatives of this approach believe that responsiveness to beauty has been developed in humans as well as in others species by means of different kinds of evolutionary mechanisms: natural, sexual, and group selection.

In *psychophysical* approach, aesthetic experiences are considered as a resource of mental representation of stimuli perceived by the senses. Positive emotions mark fluent and efficient stimuli processing conditioned on one hand by stimuli's salient features, on another hand by readiness of psychic apparatus and its psychophysiological base to perceive stimuli of certain kind.

Intuitionist approach represents aesthetic experiences as a part of cognitive resource alternative to conceptual thinking. They are manifestation of a deep reality comprehension mechanism, free from rational conscious cognition's constraints, emerging in form of emphatic understanding or immediate insight and epiphany.

In *psychodynamic* approach, aesthetic experiences are assumed a resource of conflicting mental forces' integration. Creation or contemplation of a work of art allows otherwise blocked affective impulses to penetrate into consciousness and thus makes the individual more aware and his personality more integrated. This approach is represented mostly by psychoanalysts, but also by others authors like an analytical psychologist C. Jung or a representative of cultural-historical approach L. Vygotsky.

Existential approach considers aesthetic experiences as a resource of human being wholeness and of his bonds with his life-world. Aesthetic experience itself is viewed as a value people strive for, i.e. as an autotelic motivation.

Aesthetic responsiveness as a personal trait takes the biggest attention in existential approach. A. Maslow considered aesthetic experience as a sort of peak experiences that merge human being with existential values, the beauty that makes human life more whole, healthy, and valuable, being among them. Individuals differ in their openness to peak experiences, those high on this trait using it as a resource for their personal growth and therapy. Openness to peak experiences is associated with motivation of higher level (metamotivation) contrasting with the deficiency needs, self-actualizing people being the most “peakers”.

B. Dodonov proposed a list of ten basic emotional experiences, which are life values, i.e. the subject strives to attend them by searching opportune situations. Thus these "experiences-values" play motivational role, aesthetical feeling being among them. Individuals differ in their experiential preferences, thus there is not only a classification of motives, but a typology of personality too. Dodonov equally proposed a simple measure of that emotional personality type consisting in subjects' ranking of the basic experiences' list in order of preference. The crucial point of difference between his approach and other values orientation methods consists in the values' nature: instead of objective values like the beauty of the nature and arts, there is subjective, experiential ones like the feeling of beauty.

Modern positive psychology continues that existential line of thought from more science-based perspective. C. Peterson and M. Seligman have included aesthetic appreciation in the list of character strengths grouped in six virtues providing personality's goodness. They have proposed Values In Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) self-report questionnaire for measuring character strengths comprising Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (ABE) subscale. In the study involving VIA-IS associations were found of ABE scoring (as well as some other character strengths) with overcoming depression as well as with life satisfaction level (Peterson et al., 2006).

Models of aesthetic responsiveness. Existing scales measuring aesthetic responsiveness have underlying theoretical constructs largely influenced by existential approach, which groups aesthetic experiences together with other peak experiences. As a consequence, they include not only experiences traditionally taken as aesthetic ones, i.e. of artistic and natural beauty, but usually those of the beauty of moral acting and even of skill's excellence too. The second feature of these scales is that they are focused on the experience of awe, taking it as the basic aesthetic one. The highness of awe emotion is also in direct association with peak experiences and thus confine aesthetic experiences to selected, rather spiritual states, very distinct from common mundane feelings.

The ABE subscale of VIA-IS is based on the model proposed by J. Haidt and D. Keltner, in which three kinds of emotions are grouped: *admiration*, *awe*, and *elevation*, corresponding respectively to three kinds of goodness: physical beauty, skill or talent, and virtue or moral goodness. All three of these experiences are thought as self-transcendent, with the awe as a central phenomenon. Obviously the term "excellence" is used here as a synonym of "beauty" for social events to accentuate the common aspect of these emotions and their link to the goodness. Interestingly this view of awe for beauty as a central member of self-transcendent emotions' family corresponds to a more recent McCrae's (2007) finding that aesthetic chills are a universal marker of openness to experience.

Authors have named the final version of the scale "Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence" (Haidt & Keltner, 2004); while initially, they used the terms "Awe/Responsiveness" instead of sounding more cognitively "Appreciation". Though conceived for measuring three kinds of responsiveness, ABE has only total score computed, and, as it is pointed out by Güsewell & Ruch (2012), contains no items related to skills' perfection.

Diessner et al. (2008) have proposed another model of aesthetic responsiveness, those of engagement with beauty. Authors have coined the term "engagement" to contrast "appreciation" and reflect more of experience's emotional aspect. There are three distinct kinds of aesthetic experience in Diessner's model too, but in this case, they are those of engagement with natural, artistic, and moral beauty. Besides, the model of engagement is based on the same view of aesthetic experiences as of self-transcendent ones, also including awe, admiration and elevation.

The specialized Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS) created on this model comprises of three respective subscales scored separately in addition to the total score. Authors report distinguished good reliability and concurrent validity of the EBS; its three-factor structural model showed reasonable fit with the data obtained. The initial English version of EBS was also translated into some other languages, and collected data showed similar results confirming this three-factor model.

Güsewell & Ruch (2012) have described a model encompassing those of appreciation and of engagement; it was built upon the results of their study using another approach to the trait measurement. Unsatisfied with the subjectivity of self-report method, authors presented participants with stimuli to rate according to the degree of aesthetic experiences they induce. While providing more objective measurement, this method turned out to be similar to classical aesthetic sensitivity tests. Authors themselves seem aware of this method's restriction and claim the list of stimuli to be exhaustive for its best validity.

Güsewell and Ruch have theoretically based their instrument on the structure of appreciation hypothesized by Haidt and Keltner. They included in it the items concerning skills' perfection while omitting those concerning natural beauty, and named it the Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence Test (ABET). Convergent validity of ABET with both scales of appreciation and of engagement brings some evidence of the sameness of measured trait while the resulting model combines the previous two and includes three factors or dimensions of sensitivity: those for natural beauty, for artistic beauty, and for non-aesthetic goodness (i.e. for skills, and for moral acting). Authors labeled it "responsiveness to the good and beautiful model" assuming intraindividual variance in its level depends on the subscales scores' difference (i.e. personal profile's misalignment).

Conclusion: In contrast to three well-known aesthetic mental resources: artistic and aesthetic abilities, competence, and motivation, aesthetic responsiveness as a personal trait consisting in the propensity to aesthetic experiences does not contribute so obviously to any particular activity's effectiveness. Nevertheless, there are evidences of its general influence on the human well-being indicators such as overcoming depression and life satisfaction level.

There are five conceptual approaches to aesthetic experiences' resource function: evolutionary, psychophysical, intuitionist, psychodynamic, and existential. While the common point of all these approaches is treating aesthetic experiences as a

resource of comprehensive life processes lying mostly outside consciousness, aesthetic responsiveness takes the biggest attention in the existential approach. This approach identifying aesthetic responsiveness with openness to peak experiences, and associating it with metamotivation, personal growth, self-actualization, underlies this personal traits' modern models and measurement tools.

There are three models of aesthetic responsiveness with corresponding measuring scales: appreciation model and ABE scale by Haidt & Keltner (2004); engagement model by Diessner et al. (2008); responsiveness to the good and beautiful model by Güsewell & Ruch (2012), encompassing the two previous ones, and ABET scale. All these models share the same theoretical framework and recognize as aesthetic ones emotions of awe, admiration, and elevation, thus presuming aesthetic responsiveness's multidimensional nature. Though based on different measurement method, the ABET scale showed significant convergent validity with ABE and EBS. Güsewell and Ruch assumed intraindividual variance in the aesthetic responsiveness due to the difference in responsiveness to the good and to the beautiful.

I hypothesize in turn that there is an additional source of individual variability of aesthetic responsiveness: that of appreciation-engagement (i.e. cognitive-affective) continuum mentioned by Güsewell and Ruch, but not included in their resulting model. In my opinion the so-called multitrait-multimethod model must fit the best at least EBS data. Besides, recently Diessner & Pohling (in preparation) have added a new dimension to the EBS: that of beauty of ideas. Thus, the comprehensive list of aesthetic objects remains an open question of the aesthetic responsiveness measuring. As we can see, this list can be changed, new items (like ideas) being added within the conceptual framework of existential approach. Furthermore, there are four other approaches to aesthetic experiences as mental resource not even present in the current models. It would be a promising field of a future work.

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