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Beauty and Mindfulness

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## Beauty and Mindfulness

“Beauty is not in the face; beauty is a light in the heart.”

-- Kahlil Gibran (trans. 1994)

“Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it.”

-- Confucius (n.d.)

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty- that is all,

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

-- John Keats (1819/1967, p. 295)

Beauty is all around us and has been examined for centuries by countless philosophers. From the rugged mountains of the Pacific Northwest to influential pieces of literature, beauty can be found in many forms. Those things that are considered to be beautiful can evoke feelings of pleasure or satisfaction. They may be valued simply for their visual beauty that they convey, such as the sunset or a piece of art. Beauty can also have deeper meanings, like those coming from a poem or from the kindness exhibited by a human being.

Many of the early philosophers had their own views on beauty. One of the main questions addressed is what constitutes something as being beautiful? Emmanuel Kant, an influential philosopher of aesthetics, believed that beautiful objects were just beautiful, and should be appreciated for this alone. In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790/1987), Kant wrote, “beauty pleases immediately...apart from all interest” (p. 171). By “interest,” Kant meant we should respond to beauty without the desire to possess it.

Haidt and Keltner (2004) define appreciation of beauty and excellence as “the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds” (p. 537). Those who score high on measures of appreciation of beauty typically feel a variety of

strong feelings and emotions when experiencing the different forms of beauty (Diessner, Rust, Solom, Frost, & Parsons, 2008). These feelings can come about when taking a walk in a park, listening to music, witnessing an act of kindness, and many other possible ways.

Regardless of an individual's views on what makes something beautiful, we all have our different preferences. This holds true in regards to different cultures as well. Many cultures around the world value different things and have diverse cultural views that make them unique. What is considered beautiful may vary from culture to culture and there may be some similarities. According to Brown (1991), aesthetics is highly valued in all cultures, but its expression varies. The beautiful is of value and admired in the majority of cultures, so what other characteristics comprise appreciation of beauty?

#### *The Character Strength of Appreciation of Beauty*

Appreciation of beauty falls under the category of transcendent virtues, which enables individuals to form a connection with the larger universe (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Transcendent virtues or strengths connect individuals to something larger than themselves, including other people, the divine, or the universe (Seligman, 2002). Those with the character strength of appreciation of beauty experience a sense of awe that enters one's consciousness when they are faced with something deemed aesthetically beautiful or superior in nature. Thus, the defining feature of appreciation of beauty is the emotional experience of awe or wonder when in the presence of beauty or excellence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

#### *Previous Studies with Implications on Appreciation of Beauty*

Although there has been little experimental research regarding the appreciation of beauty, there have been some potentially relevant findings in this area. Strengths of character such as bravery, humor, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty were found to be associated with

improved recovery from physical illness, psychological disorder, and the effects of trauma (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). Among those who were affected by these areas, the strengths in themselves did not cause recovery, but they were believed to play a part in improving an individual's symptoms. For professionals who deal with the previously mentioned issues among their clients, utilizing these different strengths through interventions might be beneficial to improving their ability cope with their problems and create a more optimistic outlook.

### *Engagement with Beauty*

Related to, and often used synonymously with appreciation of beauty, is engagement with beauty. Engagement with beauty involves one's understanding of and perceptions of beauty. ” . The three domains associated with engagement with beauty are natural, artistic, and moral beauty. Natural beauty refers to experiences with nature and the physical world. Examples of natural beauty include mountains, rivers, oceans, flowers, and animals. Artistic beauty may involve experiences with art, music, architecture, poetry, and literature. Moral beauty is where you recognize (or hear about) some person or an act of charity, kindness, compassion, or other virtue for others (Diessner, Rust, Solom, Frost, & Parsons, 2008).

Diessner, Rust, Solom, Frost, and Parsons (2006) constructed a study to examine whether the character trait hope was associated with appreciation of beauty. One of the objectives in this study was to determine whether an increase in engagement with beauty through the use of beauty logs would result in an increase in trait hope. Students at Lewis-Clark State College completed the *Adult Dispositional (Trait) Hope Scale* (ADHS), which measures the self-reported hopefulness trait of an individual (Snyder, *et al.*, 1991). They also completed the *Engagement*

*with Beauty Scale* at the beginning of the semester. Sixteen weeks later, they completed the same tests again.

The study found that writing weekly journal logs as well as discussing the different forms of beauty once a week resulted in a significant increase in overall trait hope (Diessner *et al.*, 2006). This is beneficial because the trait of hope is found to be associated with academic success and athletic success, as well as forms of social and psychological development (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Thus, it is implied that appreciation of beauty may be associated with an increase in hope.

### *Mindfulness*

The concept of mindfulness has various interpretations in the theoretical and research literature. Mindfulness may involve a greater sensitivity to one's environment, more openness to new information, the creation of new categories for structuring perception, and enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Mindfulness involves a subjective "feel" which is characterized by a heightened state of involvement and wakefulness or being in the present.

### *Previous Research on Mindfulness*

Studies on the differences between mindful and mindless behavior started in the 1970s, with the early work examining different characteristics of mindfulness and how they were related to health (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). The early studies looked at aging and the issue of control. The perception of control was the significant variable and when a person "behaves" mindlessly, the perception of control is not possible. Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) conducted a study to see if mindfulness could be increased with positive effects in elderly populations.

They found that by simply having control over one's schedule and plans, there was a decrease in symptoms, such as arthritis pain, and an increase in longevity.

Studies of mindfulness in a business context show that increases in mindfulness are associated with increased creativity and decreased burnout (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Another study with children, students, and the elderly (Langer & Bodner, 1997) found that if people are instructed to vary the stimulus, or mindfully notice new things when learning something new, then attention improves. This was also found to result in a greater liking for the task and improved memory.

#### *Appreciation of Beauty and Mindfulness*

The character strength of appreciation of beauty involves a "person feeling oneness with the universe, a sense of truth, an inability to express experience in mere words, and a vividness and clarity of sensations and perceptions" (Peterson & Seligman, 2003, n.p.). Peterson and Seligman go on to describe the characteristics that are considered opposite of appreciation of beauty. These things include the lack of appreciation, unmoved, and unmindful. One of the traits from the Five-Factor Model of Personality that correlates highly with appreciation of beauty is openness to experience (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The openness to experience component to this model of personality is a way to evaluate creativity, while using questions that examine items including an individual's aesthetic values and feelings. Based on the description of the character strength of appreciation of beauty by Peterson and Seligman, these aesthetic values and feelings relate to a person's appreciation of beauty and their openness to the experience.

## Hypothesis

Peterson and Seligman (2004) categorize appreciation of beauty as a character strength derived from the virtue of transcendence. Mindfulness, with its emphasis on rising above petty daily concerns, appears to also be related to the virtue of transcendence. Thus, it is suggested that there is a positive and significant correlation between appreciation of beauty and mindfulness.

In order to test this hypothesis, both engagement with beauty and mindfulness were analyzed through scales specifically designed to measure these individual concepts. Results from the surveys were then entered into an SPSS statistical analysis software program to determine if there was a positive and significant correlation between appreciation of beauty and mindfulness as predicted. The subsequent method section provides an overview of the study in greater detail.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of undergraduate students enrolled at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho. Participants were 135 students taken from lower level and upper level psychology classes. Females made up 61.2% of the sample and males the remaining 38.8%. The mean age of the participants was 24.5 (SD 8.7) years. Sixty percent were college froshes, 18% sophomores, 10% juniors, and the remaining 12% were seniors. The ethnicity of the sample was primarily white (69%), with Asian, Hispanic, and “Other” making up 21%, 6%, and 3%, respectively.

### *Measures*

*The Engagement With Beauty Scale* (EBS) is a self-report questionnaire aimed to measure the domains of beauty (Diessner *et al.*, 2008). It contains questions regarding a person’s

experience with perceiving and feeling something as beautiful. The questionnaire uses a 7-point Likert scale, with questions designed specifically for three kinds of beauty: natural, artistic, and moral. Items on the questionnaire include things like “When perceiving an act of moral beauty I feel changes in my body, such as a lump in my throat, an expansion in my chest, a faster heart beat, or other bodily responses.”

In the original validity study of the EBS (Diessner et al., 2008) Cronbach’s alphas were .91 for the EBS total score, .80 for the Natural Beauty subscale, .88 for the Artistic Beauty subscale, and .89 for the Moral Beauty subscale. Test-retest reliabilities were .79 for the total EBS, .79 for the Natural Beauty subscale, .77 for the Artistic Beauty subscale, and .67 for the Moral Beauty subscale.

#### *Freiberg Mindfulness Inventory*

The Freiberg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) scale measures the mindfulness concept used in traditional Buddhist teachings. The concept explores a person’s ability to be aware of their surroundings and ability to perceive all mental contents- perceptions, sensations, cognitions, affects (Walach, Buchheld, Buittenmuller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006). The FMI is a 14 item scale rated on a four point Likert-scale, and has good reliability with an alpha of .86. Although exact numbers were not available, the FMI claims to demonstrate strong validity.

#### *Procedure*

The subjects completed the EBS and FMI in class and the questionnaires were collected by the researcher. The study was approved by the Lewis-Clark State College Institutional Review Board (IRB) and all American Psychological Association research ethic standards were followed.

## Results

Table 1 below lists the average of the total beauty scores, as well as the three subscales of the EBS: natural, artistic, and moral. The EBS total beauty offered a possible range of 14-98 (M=71.6, SD= 13); the natural beauty and artistic beauty subscales both had possible ranges of 4-28, with actual ranges 4-28 (M=20.8, SD= 4.3) and 4-28 (M= 18, SD= 5.3), respectively. The six-item subscale of engagement with moral beauty had a possible range of 6-42, and an actual range of 18-42 (M=32.7, SD=5.8). The mindfulness scale had a possible range of 14-56, with an actual range of 14-48 (M=36.7, SD=6.9).

Table 1

*Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS) and Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) Means*

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Natural Beauty	20.8	4.3
Artistic Beauty	18.0	5.3
Moral Beauty	32.7	5.8
Mindfulness	36.7	6.9
Total Beauty	71.6	13.0

N= 135

Table 2 on the following page shows the correlation between the engagement with beauty and mindfulness. The correlation between the total beauty scores and mindfulness scores was found to be .27 ( $p = .002$ ). The correlation between engagement with natural beauty and

mindfulness was .21 ( $p = .016$ ), artistic beauty and mindfulness .29 ( $p = .001$ ), and moral beauty and mindfulness .18 ( $p = .035$ ).

Table 2

*Correlations between Engagement with Beauty Scale and Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory*

Correlation	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Total Beauty x Mindfulness	.27**	.002
Natural Beauty x Mindfulness	.21*	.016
Artistic Beauty x Mindfulness	.29**	.001
Moral Beauty x Mindfulness	.18*	.035

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . N= 135

### Discussion

In regard to the main purpose of this study, it appears that there is a relationship between appreciation of beauty and mindfulness. As predicted, there is a significant positive correlation between these two variables, however the strength of the correlation is moderately low. The correlation values between total beauty score and the three subscales of beauty range from .18-.29 in relationship to mindfulness. The correlation of .27 between engagement with beauty and mindfulness indicates that those high in mindfulness tend to appreciate beauty, and vice versa, those high in appreciation of beauty tend to be more mindful.

The potential benefits for those who score high in these areas would be interesting to examine. Previous research has yielded several possible benefits that may result from high

levels of appreciation of beauty and mindfulness. Appreciation of beauty may result in improved life satisfaction as well as hope, which has been found to be associated with academic and athletic success, as well as forms of social and psychological development. Mindfulness can result in feelings of having control over one's life, improved attention and memory, and may lead to increased creativity and decreased burnout in the work world. Perhaps comparing one of the potential benefits of either appreciation of beauty or mindfulness with the related concept would be worthwhile to see if a correlation exists.

Another finding to explore is why mindfulness correlates highest with artistic beauty. Although research in this area is non-existent, some possible explanations exist. The aesthetic nature of art can be seen in many different forms and often times require viewers to analyze and interpret what they observe. As a result, the Vincent van Gogh painting, Beatles' song lyrics, and Robert Frost's poem may require a person to cognitively analyze and interpret what they are seeing, hearing, and reading. Thus, the different forms of artistic beauty may involve a person becoming more aware of the present moment when compared to the other domains of beauty in order to cognitively translate what they are observing. Although natural beauty and moral beauty involve perceptions, analyzing, and interpretations as well, it might not be to the degree required for the forms of artistic beauty. This might explain why there is a higher correlation between mindfulness and appreciation of artistic beauty.

Mindful people are more aware of their immediate surroundings, and thus are more likely to notice beauty in nature, to notice beauty in human artifacts, and to notice beauty in human behavior. Thus it seems likely becoming more mindful will lead to an increase in engagement with beauty. Likewise, those that notice beauty in around them are more likely to be "in the now," and thus more likely to experience mindfulness.

Overall, more research is needed in this area in order to gain more definitive conclusions. Conducting the survey on a single campus may have led to statistical bias and a more diverse sample is desirable. Also, the data may be skewed due to several outliers in the sample. With increasing research and strategies to improve in these areas, people may become more aware of what these concepts entail and at the same time reap the many potential benefits they can bring.

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