



Seeing, Appreciating, Creating: Adolescents' Experience of Beauty in the Environment

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Abstract: This paper explores the importance of appreciation of beauty in developing sensitivity towards the environment, and proposes a training approach that will heighten the awareness of the individual and the beauty of the environment. The objective of this study was to describe the experiences of adolescents in appreciating beauty in their environment after going training. These specific research questions were addressed: objects of appreciated beauty in the environment; their emotions as they contemplated on beauty; their creative expressions of beauty; and the psychological benefits on the adolescents in appreciating beauty in the environment. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, 22 college students participated in this study. Their participation involved a brief training on appreciation of beauty and doing reflection logs. A thematic analysis was done to analyze their responses in the guided reflection logs. The objects of appreciated beauty are nature and human connection. Emotions that arose in contemplating on the objects of beauty are happiness, peace, and gratitude. Creative expressions of beauty involved various mediums (visual, literary, crafts). Psychological benefits included increased life satisfaction, appreciation, and change in perspective. These findings are discussed using the transpersonal concept of beauty as a value and means to developing a connection and sensitivity to the environment. Findings of this study have implications for the mental health of adolescents and environmental stewardship.

Key Words: Appreciation of beauty; environment; creativity; positive emotions; life satisfaction

1. INTRODUCTION

The attention of adolescents is often glued to their ubiquitous gadgets that connect them to a virtual world. Or if they are attuned to the actual world, they have a tendency to do much overthinking and analysis of themselves. Either way, they have become less in touch with the immediate environment, and consequently, they have less sensitivity, concern, and relationship to the external environment. To foster care and

stewardship towards the environment among the youth requires prying their eyes away from the virtual reality and their self-absorption, and redirect their attention and awareness outward towards the environment. This present study involves a creative pedagogy to teach adolescents how to appreciate beauty, that is, to bring their gaze back towards the environment, pause from their usual adolescent preoccupations and observe their daily environs, contemplate the beauty of the actual world, and develop feelings and insights that



will allow them to connect to their environment; hence, to begin a sensitive, caring relationship with the environment. As Plato put it, “the aim of all education is to teach us to love beauty.” The key to a sensitive, caring of the environment is to train young people to appreciate beauty in the environment.

Modern psychology generally tends to overlook the role of beauty in making the lives of people better, brighter and happier. Nonetheless, certain traditions in psychology, such as humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology, have not forgotten the importance of beauty. Instead, the human need for beauty, like oxygen, is affirmed as a vital element in our lives; without it, people can wither psychologically and lead dull, desperate lives (Ferrucci, 2009). Carandang, a prominent Filipino psychologist, believes that our ability to appreciate beautiful things around us requires mindful seeing and attention not only to our environment and the people around us but also reflects a state of mind that is unburdened with stress or depression Carandang, Aguilar, & De Asis, 2014). Ferrucci (1982), an Italian transpersonal psychotherapist, states that “...the task of exploring beauty and the influence it has on us is essential, for the danger that blindness to beauty entails are great: the degradation of the urban landscape, the ruthless destruction of nature, the spreading of vulgarity, the eclipse of awe, the triumph of tactlessness, the inflation of boredom, the industry of bad taste, the apotheosis of the loud and the superficial” (p. 187). From a transpersonal psychology perspective, his holistic view of healing and well-being involves retraining the senses and the mind towards an appreciation of beauty. Ferrucci (2009) proposed the concept of “aesthetic intelligence,” which is defined as “the faculty of perceiving the beautiful” (p. xxv) that covers the following aspects: the aesthetic range (the scope of experiencing beauty in many situations), the depth of aesthetic experience (the degree of being touched by beauty), and the capacity to integrate beauty (how it changes the individual and one’s relationship with the world or environment).

A growing line of research inquiry has focused attention on appreciation of the environment or nature by way of positive psychology and environmental psychology. The positive psychology movement acknowledges that beauty has an important role in people’s well-being. In Peterson

and Seligman’s (2004) concept of character strengths, they described the “appreciation of beauty and excellence” as the human capacity to feel self-transcendent emotions, such as awe and wonder, when people perceive and contemplate beauty. These powerful feelings take us out of our narrow self-preoccupations and make us feel connected to our surroundings and give us a larger perspective on our lives. Haidt and Keltner’s (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).

In a study of character strengths in relation to recovery from illness, appreciation of beauty, together with love for learning, serves as a buffer to people with depression and anxiety (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). Given the psychological effect of appreciation of beauty, a qualitative study (Martinez-Marti, Avia, & Hernandez-Lloreda, 2014) on the web-based intervention of appreciation of beauty was conducted that aimed to increase awareness of beauty and its effects on people, cultivate an aesthetic attitude, and encourage exposure to beauty; their findings showed that most participants reported improvement in their appreciation of beauty and well-being.

In a similar vein, environmental psychology studies have looked into natural beauty and well-being. Zhang, Howell, and Iyer (2014) found that connectedness with nature predicts well-being when people have high engagement with natural beauty (i.e., positive emotional responses are experienced when observing nature’s beauty). In another study, Zhang et al. (2014) found the prosocial benefits of exposure to nature’s beauty. The development of the Engagement of Beauty Scale by Diessner et al. (2008) allows further investigations of engagement with natural, artistic and moral beauty, especially in educating people to appreciate beauty, and to evaluate the effectiveness of such interventions.

Given the emerging research attention on the connectedness with environment through nature, the appreciation of beauty, and well-being, and the necessity to foster sensitivity and care of the environment, the researcher looked into the use of a pedagogical approach to train adolescents to develop environmental sensitivity through the appreciation of beauty. This paper shows the



experiences of adolescents of appreciating beauty in the environment based on this training.

1.1 Transpersonal Psychology and Appreciation of Beauty

The present study draws from the field of transpersonal psychology that looks at a holistic view of human development (body, mind, soul, spirit), and recognizes higher human values, such as beauty, creativity, wisdom, spirituality. Beauty or the aesthetic dimension of being human is acknowledged as providing a psychological and spiritual well-being as it connects the individual to something beyond one's self or the ego. The conceptual framework of the study as well as the principles for training in appreciation of beauty is based on transpersonal psychology, specifically on Psychosynthesis by Assagioli (1965) and Ferrucci (1982, 2009). Pertinent concepts are briefly discussed below.

The term "transpersonal" refers to experiences that go beyond the limitations of the ego or self of the individual to broader aspects humanity or the cosmos (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). Lajoie and Shapiro (1992) defined transpersonal psychology as the study of humanity's highest potential and the human capacity to realize the unitive, spiritual and transcendent states of consciousness. As such it integrates psychology with the spiritual and transcendent aspects of human experience. Roberto Assagioli (1965), one of the pioneers in transpersonal psychology, proposed his own approach to psychotherapy termed Psychosynthesis, which has the psychotherapeutic objective to form or reconstruct an individual's personality by unifying its conscious and unconscious aspects around a new, unifying center of wholeness.

Psychosynthesis informs this study regarding its view of the psyche that relates psychological and transcendent human experiences to human sensitivity to the environment through the aesthetic dimension of the psyche. Assagioli (1965) posits that the psyche is multi-dimensional and includes seven dimensions, which are the lower unconscious, middle unconscious, the higher unconscious or the superconscious, the field of consciousness, the conscious or personal self, the higher or transpersonal Self, and the collective unconscious. For the purposes of this study, it will

focus on the superconscious and the personal self as these concepts help conceptualize the pedagogy for environmental sensitivity through the appreciation of beauty. The appreciation of beauty in the environment is related to the superconscious, which is the region where "we receive our highest intuitions and inspirations – artistic, philosophical or scientific, ethical "imperatives" and urges to humanitarian and heroic action. It is the source of the higher feelings, such as altruistic love; of genius and of the states of contemplation, illumination, and ecstasy" (Assagioli, 1965, pp. 17-18). The superconscious, thus, enables people to have an aesthetic experience as well as a caring relationship with the environment. The personal self, as a reflection of the transpersonal Self, provides awareness, regulation and a sense of identity, and the awareness of this aspect of the psyche engenders psychological health (Assagioli, 1965; Ferrucci, 1982); thus, the personal self allows people to be aware of the contents of their consciousness, their environment, their feelings and thoughts about their aesthetic experience of appreciating beauty in the environment.

1.2 Benefits of beauty

Based on his therapy work with clients and research interviews with respondents, Ferrucci (2009) asserts that beauty is a primary human need that needs to be satisfied for a holistic growth, a solid identity and a deeper understanding of life. Likewise, Maslow (1967) proposed the concept of "aesthetic needs," which refer to a need for beauty that motivates people toward aesthetic experiences; when people with strong aesthetic needs fail to fulfill their desire for beautiful and orderly surroundings, they could become physically and spiritually ill. According to Maslow (1970, 1971), self-actualizing people, that is, psychologically healthy individuals, are motivated by B-values or Being values that include beauty.

When people are able to meet this need, beauty provides positive psychological effects, which are the following: regenerative and healing influence; self-transcending effect; and revelatory power (Ferrucci, 1982). Beauty in the various forms, such as music, architecture, imagery, nature, can have therapeutic effects on physical and mental health. For instance, the study of Ulrich (1984) showed that views of nature compared to a view of brick wall in hospitals positively influenced the health of



patients; such findings show how the beauty of nature can affect healing. The self-transcendent function of beauty allows people to forget their preoccupations and problems as beauty has the capacity to transport a person out of their narrow, individual sphere to connect with something larger and universal (Ferrucci 1982). An aesthetic experience allows for a gradual revelation or unveiling of hidden beauty that brings a deeper appreciation of itself and life (Ferrucci, 2009).

Apart from the above benefits, Ferrucci (2009) also reports joy as an emotion that is consistently experienced by his interview respondents. This emotion is accompanied by an insight about life's meaning, that life is worth living because they have been touched by the experience of beauty. Furthermore, an aesthetic experience carries with it an impulse towards creativity. The need to express comes out in creativity and a sense of play that is not limited to children (Ferrucci, 2009). The "magic of play" is discussed by Carandang (2009) as a necessary part of a child's development and self-expression; she asserts that self-expression is a basic need for children and adults through the various art forms of music, dance, poetry, writing, painting, and sports and other enjoyable activities (Carandang et al., 2014). Maslow (1970) also discussed expressive behaviors, which are spontaneous expressions emanating from within the person, such as art, play, enjoyment, appreciation, wonder.

This present study utilizes the concept of appreciation of beauty from Psychosynthesis in developing the training exercises for the adolescents in appreciating beauty, and to explore their experiences of having done so. These are the important aspects of the training of appreciation of beauty, as follows: a) to pay attention to the environment, that is, to see and appreciate what is beautiful in daily life; b) to get in touch with feelings that arise as they contemplate on the object of appreciated beauty; and c) to express their appreciation of beauty through creativity. In this study, appreciation of beauty constitutes observation of what the participant construes to be beautiful, to be aware of one's emotions that accompany the contemplation of the object of beauty, and to directly engage in beauty through their own creative expression of beauty. Psychological benefits for the beholder are a likely outcome of appreciating and engaging with beauty.

The study aimed to describe the experiences of

adolescents of appreciating beauty in their environment after undergoing a pedagogical training on how to appreciate beauty. The researcher posed the following research questions: 1) What objects of beauty did the adolescents appreciate in their environment? 2) What emotions did they experience as they contemplated on beauty in their environment? 3) What creative expressions of beauty were generated by the adolescents after their encounter with beauty in the environment? 4) What psychological benefits were experienced by the adolescents in appreciating beauty in the environment?

2. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study investigated the experience of adolescents in appreciating beauty in their environment and expressing this experience through a creative output. The respondents were recruited based on the following inclusion criteria: a) college student aged 18 and above; and b) have completed the requirements of the training for appreciation of beauty. Twenty-two psychology major students (13 females, 9 males), aged 18 to 20, agreed to participate in the study after the researcher issued an invitation for participation to the class upon submission of their project outputs. Informed consent was obtained. The research was explained to them and they were assured of strict confidentiality. The participants were given course credit for participation.

As part of the training in the appreciation of beauty, a psychology majors' class taught by the researcher was asked to undergo the appreciation of beauty in the environment project. This class project consisted of three phases, which spanned three to 10 days, and were done sequentially. Phase 1 involved a pre-observation reflection about the participant's life and a global assessment of life satisfaction using a Likert scale of 1 to 10 and a reflection on their rating. Phase 2 is the participant's observation for at least three days by paying attention to beauty in the environment and finding a beautiful object to appreciate and contemplate. They were simply instructed to look around and allow their attention to be caught by whatever they consider to be beautiful. Phase 3 involves the creative expression of their own beautiful object based on their encounter with beauty in Phase 2. The participants received instructions and reflection questions for each of the



phases and they were asked to keep a reflection log for each phase. A thematic analysis was done to identify themes in their responses in the reflection logs.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings on the adolescent respondents' experiences of appreciating beauty in the environment are presented below as themes on objects of appreciated beauty, emotions arising from contemplating beauty, creative expressions, and psychological benefits.

3.1 Objects of appreciation of beauty

Most of the respondents focused on a single object of beauty. A few respondents, however, focused their attention on more than one object. The objects of beauty that the participants appreciated have the following themes: nature, human connection, and others. Majority of the objects of beauty focused on the theme of beauty of nature, which includes the sun, sky, plants, flowers, grass and trees, mountains, butterfly, and cat. These are natural objects in their environment that the respondents encounter on a daily basis but hardly noticed; however, their observation of beauty in their environment allowed them to notice and appreciate them. The theme of human connection emerged as respondents observed the beauty in human relationships that include love between parents, siblings, friends, and romantic partners. The theme of other beautiful objects includes human eyes, food, moment-to-moment change, and college graduation as an accomplishment.

The objects of beauty that captured the attention of the respondents were mostly elements of nature. Although standards of beauty may vary culturally, the beauty of nature seems to be universally experienced, and have an evolutionary basis as paying attention to nature seems to have an adaptive value (Haidt & Keltner, 2004; Deisnner et al., 2008); moreover, neuroaesthetics has shown that there are neural correlates of beauty as specific parts of the brain are shown in neuroimaging research to become activated in response to images of beauty (Kawabata & Zeki, 2004). This finding suggests that the adolescents have the capacity to become aware of and be

sensitized to the environment through the beauty of nature, and potentially be more adaptive in response to the demands of the environment.

Some respondents observed the beauty in the deep connection in the human relationships. The beauty in the human bond or love that they observed reflects the concept of moral beauty (Haidt, 2000; Keltner & Haidt, 2003), which arouses elevated emotions when observing human virtues, and in turn, leads the perceiver of moral beauty to desire to become a better person and also model the moral exemplar.

3.2 Emotions experienced in encountering and contemplating beauty

Upon encountering beauty in the environment, the respondents reported experiencing one or more emotions, which are happiness, peace, gratitude, awe, nostalgia, and curiosity. Happiness was commonly experienced by the respondents, and includes joy and delight. Another common emotional experience was peace and it covers the feelings of calmness and relaxation. Gratitude is also evoked by a few respondents as they felt thankful and appreciative of beauty and the associations to it. Awe includes wonder and amazement in the face of natural beauty. A few respondents experienced nostalgia while perceiving and contemplating the objects of beauty as memories were triggered in association with the objects, such a carefree childhood and loving memories of grandparents.

The emotions experienced by the respondents in appreciating beauty are positive emotions. This is consistent with the findings of Zhang et al. (2004) about how connectedness with nature predicts well-being. Likewise, Ferrucci's (2009) interview respondents also reported joy when they appreciate beauty.

In this study, well-being is experienced through a range of positive emotions, which may have a reinforcing function for the adolescents to seek opportunities to appreciate beauty in their daily lives. Furthermore, these varied and deeply felt emotions suggest that the respondents showed depth of experience, which is an aspect of aesthetic intelligence, as they allowed their appreciation of beauty to pervade their being. This depth of aesthetic experience also elicited memories associated with a carefree childhood and positive

experiences with grandparents; this relates to feelings of nostalgia that may bring up tenderness, a little sadness and longing for past experiences.

3.3 Creative expressions of beauty

The participants' creative expressions of beauty are described in terms of the creative mediums used and their contents. The mediums used to creatively express their appreciation of beauty were crafts, graphic/poster art, painting or drawing, photograph, poetry, and bricolage. Most of the contents of the creativity depicted natural beauty. Many respondents produced crafts to creatively express their appreciation of beauty; their contents depicted nature or symbols of nature, aspirations, and values, as follows: mountain made of popsicle sticks, a kitten plush toy, origami floral bouquet, clay-shaped graduation cap and diploma, a card with eyes and sunflowers, textured art depicting water and wind, paper craft with self-photo and life essentials, paper airplane. Some respondents used graphic/poster art depicting family love, nature (sky, clouds, sun). A few participants produced photographs, and paintings/drawings that showed natural objects of beauty (plants, sun), faces, food, and musical instruments. Two respondents wrote poems that expressed the beauty of nature and human connection. Two respondents created a bricolage, which is an assemblage of various objects around a theme; one of them is an eco-bricolage composed of a used water bottle with various trash stuffed in it (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Eco-bricolage

Below is an excerpt of a female respondent's poem that expresses her experience and insight on how to find beauty and joy in a dark world by looking at the goodness of simple things, such as

beauty she witnessed in the joy of sharing an ice cream between siblings living on the streets.

*...and perhaps beauty is more than
the word itself.
...beauty is seeing beyond the surface.
My world is indeed beautiful,
Even in the dirtiest of places.
And as the smiles of the children
Captivated my heart, my eyes,
In that instant
I realized...
I'm sharing the same smile.*

Some respondents described their process of creating their beautiful object and what this creative expression meant for them. They noted the effort it took to create their own object of beauty; this effort was accompanied with joy. One said, "creating that plushie was a true labor of love...I made several mistakes in creating it, but in the end all that effort goes into something that will remain special and (have) become sentimental to me." Another said, "it was enjoyable and fun. ...It was as if I was back in grade school where we made art projects...When I finished working, I could not keep my smile from getting bigger. I was satisfied with it and all the hard work and time I invested into making it paid off."

Some respondents felt themselves captivated by the spirit of beauty. A female respondent, who composed a poem said, "I honestly could not control the words rushing out of me. ...Every line of the poem juices every emotion I had when I was in that beautiful moment, as if I was witnessing it all over again." Another female respondent described creating her beautiful object as "a project for my soul."

The process of creative expression allows the appreciation of beauty to shift from a passive position of perceiver to an active participant in the engagement with beauty. Findings showed a capacity to integrate their aesthetic experience, an aspect of aesthetic intelligence (Ferrucci, 2009), when the encounter with beauty continued to work inside of them as they created their own objects of beauty. In effect, the respondents were able to internalize their experience of beauty, and through the act of creative imagination, produced an image to symbolize their appreciation of beauty and then externalized it in their own created object of beauty. The act of creation allowed the respondents



to linger, deepen, and integrate their appreciation and engagement with beauty. Moreover, the process of creative expression fulfilled their need to express and engage in play (Carandang, 2009; Carandang et al., 2014), which will contribute to a sense of well-being and holistic development.

3.4 Psychological benefits of appreciating beauty

Majority of the respondents reported an increase in their life satisfaction based on a global rating in the span of 10 days of training in appreciating beauty in the environment. The initial rating of their global life satisfaction before the start of their observation of the environment was compared to their global life satisfaction rating at the end of the training, which was after the finished their creative output. One respondent expressed this increase in her life satisfaction in this way, "What happiness I once felt is now greater and more fulfilling." Another respondent declared, "I am completely satisfied because I have the tools I need at my fingertips to perceive beauty and at the same time be reminded of the beauty I do inherently possess." Nonetheless, two respondents maintained the same life satisfaction, and another one had a decrease in life satisfaction due to feelings of nostalgia.

The theme of appreciation and gratitude reflects another psychological benefit that the respondents experienced in appreciating beauty in the environment. Appreciation and gratitude include appreciation of one's self, life in general, one's environment, beauty, and simple or ordinary things and the feelings of gratitude that accompany such an appreciation. One respondent says, "(It) helped me appreciate my surroundings and even myself more." Another respondent declares, "I was able to unravel the true meaning of life...I vow to appreciate beauty--no matter how simple and little it is--every day of my life and see the goodness in all things."

The theme of change in perspective shows a shift from an unsatisfactory view of life to an insight on how live meaningfully. A respondent, states: "I will try my best not to restrict myself due to fear of being judged. I will not let others dictate to me how I should live my life." Moving from a pessimistic to an optimistic view, another respondent says, "It opened my eyes that there are

unlimited ways to make yourself happy. ...that I do not have to deal with negativity all the time."

The psychological benefits perceived by the respondents in their experience of appreciating beauty reflect the observations of Ferrucci (2009). The perceived benefits of increased life satisfaction, and change in perspective indicate the regenerative and healing influence of beauty. Their appreciation of the self, beauty, life, and environment suggests a self-transcendence, that is, an expansion of awareness that connects the personal with something larger than the self.

The experience of the respondents' appreciation of beauty (recognizing objects of beauty in, feeling positive emotions in contemplating on the object and in creating beautiful objects, and benefitting from the entire experience) partially reflects Haidt and Keltner's (2004) definition of appreciation of beauty but also extends beyond it as it hews closely with Maslow's (1970) B-value of beauty and the fulfillment of aesthetic needs towards wholeness.

From a transpersonal psychology perspective, the adolescents' experiences of appreciating beauty arise from the region of the superconscious (Assagioli, 1965; Ferrucci, 1982) that enables a deepening of the awareness of the personal self by becoming in touch with emotions, memories, insights. In turn, this deeper awareness of the personal self allows a glimpse of the transpersonal Self when the overemphasis on the ego and its concerns is lessened (that is, self-transcendent) through an experience of appreciation of beauty.

This study showed that the transpersonal experience of going beyond the ego through beauty facilitates a connection with self and the environment. The findings of this study have implications on developing sensitivity, care and stewardship of the environment among adolescents through a creative approach to pedagogy, that is, an appreciation of beauty in the environment. If the capacity of young people to appreciate beauty around them can be tapped, they will actively engage in initiatives to care for the environment. Furthermore, these findings have implications on the mental health and holistic development of adolescents as the appreciation of beauty threads through the dimensions of body, mind, and spirit, and bring about well-being.

A recommendations for future research is to conduct a quantitative study to investigate the appreciation of different aspects of beauty (e.g., natural, moral, artistic) and to look into correlates



of the capacity to appreciate of beauty (e.g., personality, stress). Another recommendation is to extend the training to include acts of appreciating beauty that will directly impact the environment as well as other people through prosocial behavior.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, adolescents can be trained to appreciate beauty in the environment and their experience of paying attention to and contemplating on beauty in their daily life, and expressing beauty through a creative form elicit positive emotions and psychological benefits. The appreciation of beauty in nature shows a transpersonal approach of developing a positive relationship with the environment.

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