

Research Articles

Ego Development and Aesthetic Judgment Styles in Iranian Adults

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Abstract

The theory of ego development presents a comprehensive framework to understand personality development throughout the stages of life. In this developmental theory, the ego is considered a cognitive-based structure and the primary synthesizing and regulating agent in personality development. Art appreciation and aesthetic judgment are considered to have personality correlates and developmental aspects. The current study aimed to examine the association between ego development and aesthetic judgment styles in adults. We recruited 202 adults from a community sample in Tehran, Iran. The age of participants in this study ranged from 18 to 64 ($M = 29.5$, $SD = 8.9$). Consistent with our hypotheses, results indicated that concrete aesthetic judgment was negatively associated with ego development. Moreover, analytical and emotional aesthetic judgment styles were positively correlated with ego development. In conclusion, individuals who scored higher in ego development tended to use more advanced aesthetic judgment styles when exposed to art.

Keywords: art, aesthetic judgment style, aesthetics, developmental psychology, ego development

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The theory of ego development proposed by Loevinger (1976) presents a comprehensive framework to understand the development of personality throughout the stages of life. Manners and Durkin (2000) suggested that cognitive complexity and personality characteristics were two crucial factors in ego development. According to the conception of ego development by Loevinger (1976), cognitive development provides a range of possibilities for the development of ego. Specifically, with a sufficient potential for cognitive functioning, the ego can develop to the advanced stages. While cognitive capacity is associated with ego development, research has indicated that ego development is interpersonal and emotional in nature (Manners & Durkin, 2000) and that it might be more strongly associated with socio-emotional cognitive development than with logico-mathematical development. Studies on ego development and cognitive factors reveal that advanced levels of ego development are associated with more advanced moral reasoning (Gfellner, 1986; Mirali, 2016), intellectual development (Cramer, 1999; Liu, 2009), and social cognition (Schultz & Selman, 1998). Research on ego development and personality traits shows that ego development is positively associated with openness to experience (McCrae, 1993), ego resiliency (Westenburg & Block, 1993), ego defense (Levit, 1993), self-esteem (Pourhosein & Ghanbari, 2016), and interpersonal characteristics such as empathy (John, Pals, &

Westenberg, 1998). In addition, studies that investigated both cognitive ability (e.g., verbal ability and Intelligence) and personality in predicting the level of ego development indicate that verbal ability or intelligence and personality significantly predict ego development (e.g., Cramer, 1999; Helson & Roberts, 1994).

Ego development is a process of meaning-making within progressive developmental stages (Blasi, 1998). In addition, Loevinger's (1976) theory provides an empirically grounded developmental sequence that consists of nine levels through which the ego can theoretically develop. The nine stages of ego development are: Presocial, Impulsive, Self-Protective, Conformist, Self-Aware, Conscientious, Individualistic, Autonomous, and Integrated. As mentioned, each level is considered qualitatively different from adjacent levels, because each level represents a particular style of organizing the psychological experiences. These nine levels are quantitative (Blasi, 1998), that is, each level is expected to be more sophisticated than the previous level. Therefore, the stepwise levels in the ego development theory provide an increasingly sophisticated view of the two-way relations between self and society (i.e., socio-emotional development).

Art is one of the most fascinating aspects of human life that clearly has developmental components (Schabmann et al., 2016). Art production has been observed in very early stages of human history. In addition, appreciation of art seems universal and is ubiquitously observed in all cultures. The fact that art production and appreciation exist across cultures and historical stages highlights the evolutionary value of art in human nature (Miller, 2000). Evolutionary psychological perspective on artistic behavior (see De Smedt & De Cruz, 2010) suggests that art is either an adaptation, which has evolved to overcome evolutionarily recurrent problems, or that it exists as a byproduct of other necessary adaptations. In the latter view art does not serve an adaptive function to solve evolutionarily recurrent problems (see De Smedt & De Cruz, 2010). Dissanayake (2007) proposed explanations on the origins of art in the deep history of human evolutionary past, from mother-child attachment to developing complex rituals. It has also been noted that art is appreciated by children, that most children like it (see Kuscevic, Kardum, & Brajicic, 2014; Nissel, Hawley-Dolan, & Winner, 2016). Furthermore, most of the explanations for the reasons of the existence of art mention the rewarding value of perception of artworks (Chatterjee, 2013), or how exposure to artworks fits the way that human brain functions (Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999). Although art appreciation is usually considered as a highly subjective experience, empirical studies in psychology have made an effort to understand the nature of art appreciation and aesthetic judgment (e.g., Gartus, Klemer, & Leder, 2015; Swami & Furnham, 2012; Swami et al., 2013).

Empirical research suggests that art appreciation and aesthetic judgment have robust evolutionary roots, neuropsychological correlates, and developmental components (De Smedt & De Cruz, 2010; De Sousa, 2004; Pearce et al., 2016). Art judgment is known to be correlated with both intelligence and personality (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2004). The principal characteristic of art and aesthetic experiences are consistent with Piaget's theory (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956), concerning the crucial role of mental representation as an important factor in one's cognitive development. Consistently, Goodman (1976) investigated the transfer processes from reality into artistic media that were involved in aesthetic appreciation. Research on psychological aspects of art appreciation and aesthetic judgment includes elements that are crucial in children's cognitive development. However, Freeman and Parsons (2001, p. 89) reported that "It seems fair to say that the systematic study of the understanding of artworks by children remains relatively undeveloped", for example, regarding emotional correlates of art appreciation. According to Housen (1992), one's aesthetic judgment qualitatively changes as the individual gets older and, consequently, masters higher-order abilities with regard to cognitive development. This view on developmental sequences behind aesthetic judgment has been empirically supported (Mockros,

1993). Research also suggests that individuals rate artworks as more beautiful when those artworks are cognitively processed more easily (Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004).

The four-factor model of aesthetic judgment style is also based on developmental theories in art appreciation and aesthetic judgment (Bahrami-Ehsan, Mohammadi-Zarghan, & Atari, 2015). According to this four-factor model of aesthetic judgment, individuals tend to react to artworks differently and their reactions may be categorized as one of the following “styles”: Concrete, Analytical, Symbolic, and Emotional. Concrete aesthetic judgment style consists of reactions that describe works of art using their superficial qualities. Analytical aesthetic judgment style involves logical and conventional comments when exposed to an artwork. Symbolic aesthetic judgment style includes reactions that are apart from concrete, superficial, and practical qualities and concentrates on abstract ideas and symbolic elements of the artwork. Finally, emotional judgment style includes affective statements and comments when exposed to a piece of art and is experienced when an individual feels emotionally connected to the artwork (Bahrami-Ehsan et al., 2015).

While the developmental aspects of art appreciation and aesthetic judgment have been examined in children and adolescents, few studies (e.g., Jacobsen & Beudt, 2017; Leder, Gerger, Brieber, & Schwarz, 2014) have investigated the developmental aspects of art appreciation and aesthetic judgment in adults. Specifically, no previous study has investigated the associations between ego development and aesthetic judgment styles. Such studies are especially sparse in non-Western cultures. The current research aimed to investigate the associations between ego development (as an important developmental construct) and aesthetic judgment styles in appreciation of artworks (i.e., Concrete, Analytical, Symbolic, and Emotional) in Iranian adults. According to previous body of research on factors contributing to art appreciation, we made the following hypotheses: Ego development would be negatively correlated with concrete aesthetic judgment style (Hypothesis 1); ego development would be positively correlated with analytical aesthetic judgment style (Hypothesis 2); ego development would be positively correlated with symbolic aesthetic judgment style (Hypothesis 3); ego development would be positively correlated with emotional aesthetic judgment style (Hypothesis 4). In addition to these specific hypotheses, we also examined the association between age and ego development. We expected ego development and age to be positively correlated (Hypothesis 5).

Methods

Participants and Procedure

We recruited a community sample of 202 participants from social settings in Tehran, Iran. Generally, Tehran may be considered the economic and cultural center of Iran. Age of the participants in the current sample ranged from 18 to 64 ($M = 29.5$, $SD = 8.9$). In terms of highest educational qualification, one participant had some high school training, 14 participants had a high school diploma, 22 participants had an associate's degree, 114 participants had a bachelor's degree, and 42 participants had a master's or doctorate degree. Of note, 9 participants did not provide their highest educational qualification. In terms of area of study, 31 participants had a degree in arts, 85 participants had a degree in mathematics or engineering, 3 participants had a medical degree, and 73 participants had a degree in humanities. Of note, 10 participants did not provide their field of study. All participants were approached and invited to take part in a research regarding psychology and arts. Upon agreement, they were given a paper-and-pencil questionnaire containing the measures. After

they returned the questionnaires, participants were debriefed on the nature of the study. Participants were not remunerated for their time.

Measures

Ego Development

All participants provided their answers to the 18-item version of the Sentence Completion Test (SCT; Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Loevinger & Wessler, 1970). Specifically, 18 open-ended stems are available and participants are given a space to complete each statement. A sample item is “Women are lucky because...”. The 18-item SCT has been previously used with adequate validity and reliability (e.g., King & Raspin, 2004). Previous work also suggests that this measure has good temporal stability, inter-rater reliability, and internal consistency (Manners & Durkin, 2001). Additionally, longitudinal studies indicate that the SCT successfully measures sequential stages of the development of personality (Redmore & Loevinger, 1979). In the present study, participants’ responses were coded by two raters, according to Hy and Loevinger (1996). The raters were trained in developmental psychology and Loevinger’s (1976) theory. The ratings of the two raters were highly consistent. Specifically, the inter-rater agreement correlation (Spearman’s rho) for the 18 items ranged from .77 ($p < .001$) to .94 ($p < .001$). The overall agreement correlation between the raters was .95 ($p < .001$). Once the responses were coded, each individual was given a Total Protocol Score (TPR). Potential disagreements between the raters were settled by the first and second authors.

Aesthetic Judgment Style

We used the Aesthetic Judgment Style Scale (AJSS; Bahrami-Ehsan et al., 2015) to measure each participant’s style in response to artworks. The AJSS is a 32-item scale with adequate psychometric properties. The scores on the AJSS have acceptable convergent validity and internal consistency. The AJSS measures four conceptually distinct aesthetic judgment styles: Concrete (sample item: “*I prefer to observe artworks, rather than discussing them*”), Analytical (sample item: “*I tend to assess artworks logically*”), Symbolic (sample item: “*I enjoy reasoning about latent symbols in artworks*”), and Emotional (sample item: “*each time I see my favorite artist’s artworks, I feel closer to them*”). Each style consists of 8 items. We averaged all 8 items to reach a total score on each dimension. All items of the AJSS are declarative sentences that are rated along a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Completely disagree*, 4 = *Completely agree*). In the present sample, internal consistency coefficients were satisfactory. Specifically, Cronbach’s α coefficients were .74, .75, .78, and .77 for Concrete, Analytical, Symbolic, and Emotional styles, respectively.

Demographic Details

In addition to the SCT and AJSS, participants provided their age, sex, highest educational qualification, and field of study.

Results

Prior to correlational analyses for testing a priori hypotheses, we calculated the descriptive statistics for the study variables. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for men and women, separately. We also checked potential sex differences using independent samples *t*-tests. As can be seen in Table 1, different styles of aesthetic judgments were not different between men and women. Effect sizes were small to moderate ($.06 < d$

< .25). The ego development level was higher in men ($t(200) = 3.08, p = .002$). The magnitude of this difference between ego development levels was moderate (mean difference = 0.38, 95% CI [0.12, 0.63], $d = 0.42$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Sex Differences for the Study Variables

Variable	Men ($n = 96$)		Women ($n = 106$)		Sex effect		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Concrete AJS	2.51	0.65	2.36	0.57	1.87(200)	.06	0.25
Analytical AJS	2.91	0.55	2.88	0.52	0.41(200)	.68	0.06
Symbolic AJS	2.88	0.62	3.01	0.49	1.66(200)	.10	0.23
Emotional AJS	3.18	0.56	3.13	0.60	0.61(200)	.54	0.09
Ego development	4.60	0.87	4.22	0.88	3.08(200)	.002	0.42

Note. AJS = Aesthetic Judgment Style.

The correlation coefficients between the study variables (i.e., aesthetic judgment styles and ego development) are presented in Table 2. It can be seen that the correlation coefficients between the aesthetic judgment styles were small to moderate ($.01 < r < .41$), indicating that each dimension measures an independent style of aesthetic judgment. Moreover, ego development was negatively associated with concrete judgment style ($p < .05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Ego development was positively associated with analytical aesthetic judgment style. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is also supported. The correlation coefficient between symbolic aesthetic judgment style and ego development was positive, yet it was statistically non-significant ($p = .78$). As a result, Hypothesis 3 is not supported. Finally, ego development was positively associated with emotional aesthetic judgment style ($p < .05$). Consequently, Hypothesis 4 is also supported.

Table 2

Inter-Correlations Between All Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Concrete AJS	1			
2. Analytical AJS	.18*	1		
3. Symbolic AJS	.01	.41**	1	
4. Emotional AJS	-.04	.27**	.28**	1
5. Ego development	-.16*	.14*	.02	.16*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note. AJS = Aesthetic Judgment Style.

We also investigated the association between ego development and age. The correlation coefficient between ego development and age was positive and statistically significant, $r(200) = .14, p < .05$. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 is supported. In addition, we examined the associations between aesthetic judgment styles, educational qualifications, and age. Participants' education was negatively correlated with concrete ($\rho = -.15, p = .04$), and analytical styles ($\rho = -.16, p = .02$). Age was positively associated with analytical aesthetic judgment style, $r(200) = .29, p < .001$.

Discussion

The present research was designed to examine the association between ego development and aesthetic judgment style. In line with previous body of literature on developmental components of art appreciation and aesthetic judgment in adults, we made five a priori hypotheses. Four of these hypotheses (# 1, 2, 4, and 5) were supported. However, Hypothesis #3 was not statistically supported in the present sample. Findings of the present study can generally add to the psychological literature on art appreciation and aesthetic judgment in adults. In addition, the present sample was selected from Iran, an understudied cultural setting in the empirical literature on psychology of arts and aesthetics.

We hypothesized that concrete aesthetic judgment style would be negatively associated with ego development of adults. This hypothesis was supported, indicating that individual with higher levels of ego development less frequently judged artworks, according to their superficial qualities. Findings also supported the second hypothesis. That is, analytical aesthetic judgment style was positively associated with ego development. Individuals with more mature personalities and more advanced cognitive faculties were more likely to judge art analytically. Emotional aesthetic judgment was also positively related to ego development. Generally, emotional aesthetic judgment style is considered an “advanced” style in reaction to artworks and is frequently seen in artists (Bahrami-Ehsan et al., 2015). Therefore, this advanced style of aesthetic judgment may be developed in accordance with the development of ego in adults. These findings are consistent with the broad conceptualizations in Piaget’s theory (see Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). We also found a non-significant positive relationship between symbolic aesthetic judgment style and ego development. Therefore, Hypothesis #3 was not supported in this sample. Lastly, we found a positive association between ego development and age. The magnitude of this relationship was in line with previous works (e.g., King & Raspin, 2004).

In conclusion, individuals with more advanced levels of ego development have mature personalities and more advanced cognitive abilities. In terms of art appreciation, these people tend to express their comments and feelings using more advanced styles of aesthetic judgment (e.g., analytical and emotional). On the other hand, individuals with a less developed ego are more likely to explicitly comment on apparent and superficial qualities of artworks. In terms of aesthetic judgment style, such individuals use less advanced styles (e.g., concrete). These findings are broadly in accordance with the model of aesthetic experience proposed by Leder, Belke, Oeberst, and Augustin (2004) and empirical findings of Furnham and Chamorro-Premuzic (2004).

This study had limitations to note. First, our sample was selected using a non-probability method. Therefore, the present results may not necessarily represent attitudes of the population. Second, the sample was selected from a community sample. Artists and art professionals may show a different pattern of relationships between ego development and aesthetic judgment style. Third, we used cross-sectional data and correlational analyses. Therefore, the direction of the relationships cannot be determined with full certainty.

It is recommended for future research to use random samples for examining the association between ego development and aesthetic judgment style. It is also recommended for future studies to replicate the present results among artists, art students, and art professionals. As mentioned, ego development may be differently associated with aesthetic judgment in those samples. Future research could also use longitudinal designs to overcome the methodological limitations of cross-sectional sampling and correlational analysis. Longitudinal studies can also identify how aesthetic judgments change through developmental stages in adulthood.

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Competing Interests

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