

Older Adults and the Arts

The Importance of Aesthetic Forms of Expression in Later Life

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the importance of aesthetic forms of expression in a randomly selected Swedish population age 65 to 89. Data were based on semi-structured interviews with 166 participants. Results revealed dance, music, literature, and pictures were important for this group of elderly individuals in promoting successful aging, and the connection to their everyday life was apparent. Participants considered viewing natural scenes and looking in a photo album as important aesthetic activities. The aesthetic forms of expression contributed to physical and intellectual activities, as well as to interaction with other people. Aesthetic experiences were related to feelings of timelessness and spacelessness, and served as sources of gratification.

Humanistic functions of aesthetics can be described in words such as emotionality and intensity. Music, painting, and literature enlarge and intensify sensory experiences and offer sources of pleasure that cannot be experienced otherwise (Dickie, 1974; Hillman, 1998; Hirn, 1902; Martin, 1998; Morgan, 1998; Weitz, 1976). Khatchadourian (1980) describes a number of major humanistic functions of aesthetics; one of these functions is that aesthetics help individuals know themselves and become alive to human conditions. Aesthetic expressions give individuals a new way of looking at themselves and the world; for example, paintings or music invite individuals to participate in a new visual and auditory experience.

The purpose of this study was to obtain a comprehensive catalogue of aesthetic forms of expression of significance for elderly individuals. Music, dance, literature, and the visual arts were considered, and how

these aesthetic forms of expression related to the meaning of life for older adults was examined.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While time allocated to work declines with aging, the allocation of time to leisure activities also declines. McPherson and Kozlik (1987) reported leisure activities become more passive and home centralized with increasing age. Ross (1990) found elderly individuals spend less time attending cultural events outside the home and more time at home reading, listening to the radio, and watching television. In contrast to most leisure activities, the amount of time spent reading appears to increase with age.

A negative view of aging can be confronted by aesthetic forms of expression, concerned with providing new possibilities for positive, more human meanings of aging. Aesthetic forms of expression for elderly individuals can mean discovering, preserving, or developing pos-

sibilities for a meaningful life. In several controlled intervention studies, Wikström (2000, 2002) reported paintings elicited beneficial effects in elderly individuals. Dialogues generated by reproductions of the works of well-known artists had a positive impact on elderly individuals' perceptions of their life situation and social interaction compared to a control group in which the dialogues were about events of the day and the elderly individuals' hobbies and interests.

In a Swedish survey of living conditions, Bygren, Konlaan, and Johansson (1996) interviewed 12,675 people and then conducted follow up with respect to survival. The results showed attendance at cultural events, which included visiting museums, art exhibitions, theaters or concerts, reading books, and singing in a choir, had a positive influence on survival rates.

Maslow, like Dewey, dealt with human experience. Both viewed aesthetic experiences and peak experi-

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ences as particular kinds of experience. In *Art as Experience* (1934/1958), Dewey argues an experience is the result of interaction between a human being and some aspect of the environment. Reflecting on an experience after its occurrence, according to Dewey, is neither emotional nor intellectual alone. Rather, an aesthetic experience is an intensified form of an ordinary experience that belongs not only to museums or concert halls, but also to general experiences that culminate in aesthetic experiences.

Maslow (1970) spoke of aesthetic peak experiences as moments of joy and a temporary loss of a sense of time and self-awareness. For instance, individuals could feel a day passing as if it were only a few minutes. In such moments, reality is perceived as good and desirable, and the experience could be so valuable as to make life worthwhile. There are many beneficial aftereffects of aesthetic peak experiences; individuals' views of themselves, others, and the world might be changed in a healthy direction. In additions, such experiences are often so desirable that individuals seek to repeat them.

PROCEDURE

This study was humanistic in nature and was conducted in the homes of elderly individuals. The study conformed with the Swedish Council for Humanities and Social Sciences ethical principles in the conduct of research with human participants.

Sample and Setting

The sample consisted of 166 elderly individuals who lived in their own apartment. Participants were required to be older than age 65 (range, 65 to 98 years; mean age, 76.6 years) and well-oriented mentally as to name, time, and setting. Mean age was 74.8 years for men ($n = 80$) and 78.4 years for women ($n = 86$). There were no significant differences in demographics regarding education,

retirement age, and living with a spouse.

Data Collection

Addresses and telephone numbers of elderly individuals living in an administrative province in Sweden were randomly selected from the National Registration Office. The individuals were then mailed a letter asking them to participate in this research concerning aesthetic activities.

One week later this first contact was followed up by a telephone call requesting permission for an interview. The interviewer informed potential participants that the purpose of the interview was to ascertain elderly individuals' experiences of music, dance, literature, and the visual arts, and the significance of these in their life.

All individuals who agreed to participate were fully informed about the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and the right to interrupt participation at any time. The researcher tried to be as clear as possible in stating the demands on the time of the participants and about the direction of the research, so participants could agree or refuse to take part on the basis of this information.

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes and consisted of the following questions:

- What do aesthetic activities such as music, literature, dance, and art mean to you?
- What daily aesthetic activities do you take interest in?
- What weekly aesthetic activities do you take interest in?
- What monthly aesthetic activities do you take interest in?
- What yearly aesthetic activities do you take interest in?
- What aesthetic activities did you take interest in when you were young?

The interviewer took notes

throughout the interview and wrote significant statements verbatim. The interviewer's notes were typed the same day of each interview. The extent and length of the interview varied between 30 minutes and 45 minutes, and typed interview transcripts ranged from one to two pages.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was qualitative (Morse & Field, 1996), and data were analyzed as follows:

- Reading the typed interviews carefully to gain an overview.
- Re-reading the typed interviews and searching the data for concepts relevant to aesthetic experiences of importance for elderly.
- Searching the descriptive codes.
- Developing themes from the codes.

Rigor was achieved when a clear decision trail was followed. This meant that any reader or another researcher could follow the progression of events in the study and understand the logic and justification for what was actually done and why (Manen, 1983).

Validity was assured in three ways. The first level was feedback during the interview to assure the interviewer correctly understood participants' comments. The second level constituted quoting directly from the interview. The third level was the connection of the interpretation to previous research in the area (Kvale, 1989). To give validation of the accuracy of the findings, the literature was referenced in appropriate places, and themes were validated with data.

The criteria for establishing trustworthiness in the present study were credibility and dependability. Credibility was ensured by describing and identifying those participating accurately, and dependability relied on credibility. According to Robson (1993), a qualitative research study that establishes credibility will

TABLE 1**MEAN FREQUENCY VALUES FOR AESTHETIC ACTIVITIES OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

Activity	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Twice a Year	In Younger Years
Dance	0	.02	.02	.2	.8
Music	.8	.1	.2	0	0
Visual art	0	0	0	.5	.01
Literature	.6	.2	.1	.01	.1

also be dependable. In this study, dependability was assured by following a clear research procedure and discussing decisions taken about theoretical choices with a research colleague.

RESULTS

In the first stage of the study, an inventory of the aesthetic activities the study sample took interest in or participated in on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis was compiled. Participants reported an interest in the following aesthetic activities:

- Dance, which included dancing in public place or at home with friends.
- Music, which included listening to music at home and attending concerts.
- Visual art, which included visiting museums and art exhibitions.
- Literature, which included reading books and magazines.

Frequency values of each aesthetic activity were calculated (Table 1). In some cases, individuals reported participating in the same aesthetic activity both daily and weekly, or weekly and monthly. For visual art, participants' preferred seascapes and landscapes that were plain and easy to understand (Table 2).

In the second stage, recurrent content themes in interview data were studied to determine whether the themes were related to aesthetic experiences of significance for the participants. Results were interpreted based on the works of Dewey

(1934/1958) and Maslow (1964, 1970) that concerned the nature of an aesthetic experience and its value for human beings. Both viewed aesthetic experiences and aesthetic peak experiences, respectively, as particular types of valuable experiences for human beings.

Themes and subthemes described the participants' stated opinions of the meaning of music, dance, literature, art, and nature, and the significance of these in their lives. Themes were related to the theoretical perspective of study (Dewey, 1934; Maslow, 1970).

Two main themes emerged from the interview question, "What do aesthetic activities such as music, literature, dance, and art mean to you?" These two themes were: gives life meaning and initiator of activity. Subthemes that emerged for the

gives life meaning theme included a sense of timelessness and spacelessness, a source of gratification, and decoration. Subthemes that emerged for the initiator of activity theme included interaction with other people, a versatile intellect, and physical mobility. Representative comments made by participants that illustrate the themes and subthemes are included in the Sidebar.

DISCUSSION

Two aspects of aesthetics were explicitly expressed in this study and present a picture of the importance of aesthetic experiences for older adults. One aspect constituted the occurrence of a response to an aesthetic object, of becoming totally absorbed and forgetting the ordinary concerns of life. This response component can be exemplified by one of

TABLE 2**PREFERENCES OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS (N = 166) REGARDING PAINTINGS**

Preference	n	%
Representation		
Plain and easy to understand	138	83
Not modern and abstract	143	86
Motif		
Landscape	157	91
Seascape	137	82
Color		
Richly colored	144	87
Not loud colors	139	84

PRIMARY THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

Gives Life Meaning

- Sense of timelessness and spacelessness
 - “Music transports me in imagination to old times.”
 - “Listening to a favorite piece of music makes you feel lighthearted.”
 - “Looking in my photo album is a way to relax and remember old times.”
 - “You forget everything around you with a good book in your hand.”
 - “Reading makes it possible to visit the most fantastic places.”
 - “When reading or listening to music, time runs away.”
- Source of gratification
 - “Listening to music is the best experience I can think of. I feel whole as a person.”
 - “Reading means a lot to me – sometimes it makes me happy, sometimes sad.”
 - “When looking in my photo album, I realize that I have had a full life and that it still contains a great deal to be happy about.”
 - “The experience of reading and listening to music give life a meaningful content.”
 - “Listening to music and reading a good book is the cornerstone of my life.”
- Decoration
 - “My paintings mean a lot for the feeling of homeliness.”
 - “I feel good when looking at my decorated walls.”
 - “Paintings are needed in order to create a cheerful atmosphere.”
 - “I use paintings to decorate my home. Who can stand blank walls?”
 - “Photographs of my grandchildren have a given place on the book shelf.”
 - “The best paintings I know of are when contemplating nature.”

Initiator of Activity

- Interaction with other people
 - “Visiting the library is a way to meet and get to know other persons.”
 - “When I join a book club, I feel that I belong to a group.”
 - “Music and dance widen the social network and give a sense of community.”
- Versatile intellect
 - “Reading gives you an agile mind.”
 - “Reading a book keeps my brain working.”
 - “When my brain is empty, I visit the library to get myself an interesting book.”
 - “Reading gives me new matters to think about.”
- Physical mobility
 - “Dancing is a keep-fit exercise.”
 - “Dance gives me a possibility to get some exercise and to stretch my legs a little.”
 - “I used to dance a lot when I was young; sometimes I still do to get some exercise.”

the participants' statement that “time runs away” when reading or listening to music. Maslow (1970) called such experiences aesthetic peak experiences and described them

as moments of intense insight and joy. Maslow typified aesthetic peak experiences as being so valuable as to make life worthwhile by their occasional occurrence:

The individual can feel a day passing as if it were only a few minutes, and in such moments reality is perceived as good and desirable. (p. 31)
Similarly, Russel (1951) held

recreation in the form of reading is a way to avoid tiredness and tension, and for some, to forget worries and anxiety. Leenerts (1994) also expressed similar views.

The second component of importance for the elderly participants in this study, the affective meaning of an aesthetic experience, could have been generated by the complexity in the aesthetic forms of expression. In general, experiencing a desired aesthetic form of expression increases a variety of positive aspects of life qualities. This affective aspect was expressed by participants who noted the importance of reading in their lives.

Maslow believed the affective aspect of an aesthetic peak experience is that the experience is of utmost importance in a individual's life. The emotional reaction in the aesthetic peak experience has a touch of being overwhelmed, to experiencing something that is too wonderful. Maslow shared Dewey's (1934/1958) philosophy of regarding the positive value of aesthetic experiences in an individual's life.

Khatchadourian (1980) also spoke of aesthetic forms of expression as valuable because they cause feelings of happiness or sadness. Goleman (1996) believed that aesthetic forms of expression develop the ability to understand one's own feelings and that feelings work together with cognitive faculties. Polanyi and Prosch (1975) and Denzin (1984) posited the mechanism of aesthetics serve to arouse us from our private concerns and to open up our minds.

Khatchadourian (1980) believed art "preserves our capacity to form human relations" (p. 14). This statement has reciprocity in the present study as aesthetic forms of expression provided a channel for communication with neighbors, family, and friends, and allowed individuals to be part of a social network. For example, participants commented that visiting the library was a way "to meet others and get to know

other persons" or that music and dance served to "widen the social network and give a sense of community."

Weitz (1979) held similar views regarding the aesthetic forms of expression acting as an intermediary, noting that they serve to:

offer a social network and a sense of community that lessen the isolation from our fellow human beings. (p. 20)

Similarly, Baklien and Carlsson (2000) noted cultural activities generate a sense of community that prevents social isolation.

The elderly participants in this study were book lovers and reported reading as an important daily activity (Table 1). This finding was similar to that of Ross (1990), who reported elderly individuals spent more time reading with increasing age.

In this study, a versatile intellect was connected to reading and was expressed by participants in words such as "reading a book keeps my brain working" or "reading gives me new matters to think about." This finding is in line with Khatchadourian (1980), who believed aesthetic forms of expression develop the intellectual capacity.

Baklien and Carlsson (2000) reported visiting a library to read or borrow a book was a way to keep intellectually active. Cohen (1993) reported reading books had a healing power, meaning that it contributed to an intellectual versatility.

Weitz (1976) described the human function of aesthetics somewhat differently. He used the concept enlargements, meaning that:

the expansion of the realm of possibilities for personal experiences and the intensification of the experiences already had. (p. 23)

Although the participants in this study did not visit art museums to look at paintings, they expressed they were interested in decorating their homes with paintings to make their homes more inviting. The phenomenon that people prefer beauty

rather than ugliness was expressed by participants with comments such as "paintings make a home look inviting."

Londos (1993) reported time and money was spent on decorating walls with paintings because of the feeling of homeliness. One indicator was that time and money were spent in this area. In the present study, participants noted that they could not stand blank walls and that they felt good when looking at their decorated walls.

Florence Nightingale (1860/1969) maintained health was improved by beautifying the surroundings. Maslow (1970) found some of his patients from his clinical practice recovered from beautiful surroundings. Similarly, Watson (1994) believed arrangements for a personalized and beautiful environment were important for well-being.

Morgan (1998) also described the importance of beauty for the well-being of human beings. Scarry (1999) argued that admiring the beautiful was nothing to be ashamed of and that beauty was lifesaving: "Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life...worth living" (p. 24).

In this study, when answering the question about daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly aesthetic activities, participants mentioned music, literature, dance, and art. However, when answering the question about what aesthetic activities such as music, literature, dance, and art meant to them, they included natural scenes and looking at photo albums as aesthetic activities. Viewing nature was regarded as important as viewing paintings and was expressed in statements such as, "The best of paintings I know of are when contemplating nature."

This finding is similar to research conducted by Ulrich (1986), who described human responses to vegetation and landscapes in positive terms. He found that views of nature, compared to urban scenes



KEYPOINTS

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- 1 Humanistic functions of aesthetics such as music, painting, and literature offer sources of pleasure and a new way for individuals to view themselves and the world.
- 2 Two aspects of the importance of aesthetics for older adults emerged: one is the occurrence of a response to an aesthetic object, of becoming totally absorbed and forgetting the ordinary concerns of life, and the second aspect is the affective meaning of an aesthetic experience.
- 3 Aesthetic forms of expression provide a channel for communication and serve to lessen feelings of isolation, thereby generating a sense of community.

lacking trees and other vegetation, had more positive influences on emotional and physiological states. Similar findings were reported by Stamps (1994), who found natural scenes were preferred over scenes with buildings. Day (1990) spoke of nature as places of the soul and as experiences important for human beings.

Besides decorating the home with paintings and views of nature, art also included photographs. Participants discussed the importance of photographs of spouses, children, and grandchildren. When participants looked through their photo album, they connected with images of the past. One participant noted "Looking in my photo album is a way to relax and remember old times." Looking at a photo album helped participants realize that they had lived a full life and that their life still contained a great deal to be happy about and to wonder at. Enzman Hagedorn (1996) also found a new view of a person's life was revealed when photographs were used as an entree for interviewing, and Leenerts (1994) expressed similar

views.

Maslow (1964, 1970) and Dewey (1934/1958) spoke of perceiving an aesthetic experience as central to human life because one aspect of an aesthetic experience is integration of the splits within the person or an ability to rise above the parts and perceive the whole. The importance of an aesthetic experience, as described by Dewey (1934) and Maslow (1964, 1970), also was expressed by participants in this study.

NURSING IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study suggest older adults' aesthetic experiences could be a potential means for promoting successful aging. The evidence from this study offers useful information for nurses to plan and design aesthetic programs in gerontological nursing practice. Aesthetic programs should be built on older adults' aesthetic preferences, offering a cognitive and emotional tool by which nurses can communicate with patients.

Nurses also should emphasize questions regarding patients' aesthet-

ic preferences and stimulate them to continue aesthetic activities. For instance, nurses can encourage patients to read a book, listen to music, or view a painting.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to obtain a comprehensive catalogue of aesthetic activities of significance in elderly individuals' daily life. Further research is needed, especially in different ethnocultural groups, to obtain a deeper understanding of the meaning of aesthetic experiences for older adults.

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