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Sculpting Aesthetic Experiences through Autistic Indigenous Knowledge

Manuel A. Sánchez Peña

Knowledge about aesthetics has evolved throughout history since it was first approached. Aesthetic value used to be attributed exclusively to the symmetry and harmony in an artwork's features (Costelloe, 2013). Aristotle argued that the closer an artwork replicates the beauty of nature, the more aesthetic value it possesses; and Plato valued artwork that represented his world of ideas theory, which states that sensory data creates subjective understandings of the world, and ideas have the potential to make sense of the sensory data through reason. Augustine and Aquinas were theologians whose aesthetics were close to Aristotle's, though they attributed aesthetic features to artwork that facilitated the connection with god. When contemporary philosophy designates Aesthetics as a formal discipline, the concept gradually expands to encompass a wider range of elements, extending beyond the traditional domain of the arts. This situation led to contributions made by psychologists, who related sensory processing with emotions, attitudes, and responses. Munro & Scruton (2023) consider these additions to be the foundational base of the concept of aesthetic experience, which remains challenging to define.

Silvia (2012) considers aesthetic experience to have two poles. On one side, aesthetic experience is an idealized and rare state that occurs when the individual interacts and responds to things considered special. On the other side, aesthetic experiences are emotional experiences, which connotes that almost anything has the potential to possess aesthetic value. Beardsley (1979) approached this concept as: "the capacity of a certain element to generate experiences defined by an aesthetic character" (p. 728). Beardsley also identified five common traits presented in aesthetic experiences: suppression of the rest of surrounding activities towards the aesthetical object, a sense of harmony, the seek for order and coping methods, the uncover new insights or understandings and the state of being complete. Shusterman (2006) proposes a more comprehensive meaning, as the "subjective encounters or engagements with art, beauty, or other aesthetic

phenomena that evoke emotional, sensory, intellectual, or transformative responses in individuals," (p. 218) suggesting that the aesthetic experience's individualized importance depends on each person's values, perspectives, experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Cupchik & Winston (1996) summarize two different categories of aesthetic experience in artwork: naive experiencing, when the aesthetic element is treated as a habitual object, which hinders the engagement with aesthetic elements in a sustained manner; and disciplined experiencing an artwork means to prompt a more sustained engagement towards the aesthetic element and appreciate its complexity. Recent literature has explored aesthetics in Cultural Studies and History, which demonstrate the relevance of the field in understanding human experience.

One area of interest is the societal experiences of autistic people. Historically, knowledge about autism has been limited to neurotypical perspectives. Since the rise of the neurodiversity paradigm, autistic scholars and activists have been advocating for a broader understanding of autism in academia (Walker, 2021). This view was developed collectively by the neurodivergent community as a structured, indigenous perspective for understanding neurodivergent experiences. Other studies present approaches and findings that diverge from the core tenets of the neurodiversity paradigm. Embracing this perspective would be a fruitful step for academia.

Literature Review

Roth (2018) emphasizes artistic productions when analyzing poems written by autistic individuals. The findings highlight the reader's challenge to classify those pieces in a singular genre due to the diversity in styles and the tendency to unfollow prescribed rules of poetry. While the author recognizes there is no universal art style employed by the autistic participants, systemization and repetition were patterns commonly recognized. Importantly, the study demonstrates the inconsistency of the widespread misconception of autistic individuals being closed to engage in spontaneous self-expression.

Park et al. (2018) investigated aesthetic perception in autistic and non-autistic individuals by examining neural activity differences during judgements

of artwork. Their research employed landscaped and fractal images as visual stimuli to assess these variations. Autistic individuals catalogued both image types as less beautiful. However, the predominant difference in scores stemmed primarily from the ratings on the fractal images. This finding coincided with greater amygdala activity in the autistic group. Since increased amygdala activity is associated with heightened adrenaline and cortisol levels (Šimić, et al., 2021), the results suggest a potential link between elevated anxiety and the exposure to fractal images in autistic participants. Furthermore, the study reveals a greater engagement of brain regions within the autistic participants when judging aesthetic features in elements compared to the non-autistic group. However, a critical limitation of the research lies in not addressing whether the aesthetic judgements of autistic people reflect a difference in processing, the underlying factors influencing these judgements, or potential biases within the measurement tools used to address the outcomes. Considering these aspects in future research could provide more nuanced results.

Masataka (2018) also investigated aesthetic experiences in autistic and non-autistic individuals. Each participant drew their most enjoyable experience during a shared picnic. The results revealed that the autistic group produced a greater number of drawings and displayed a higher interest in non-human objects compared to the non-autistic participants, who tended to focus on depicting people. This suggests a potential processing difference of aesthetic experiences, with autistic people exhibiting a more detailed-oriented approach in the assignment. While the study itself is not grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm, it provides a valuable baseline for exploring the differences in aesthetic experiences between autistic and neurotypical individuals.

Mazza et al. (2020) related aesthetic experiences with the ability to empathize. The assignment consisted of making aesthetic judgements about faces portraits through eye-tracking. The device revealed that the non-autistic individuals tend to focus primarily on the faces, in contrast with the autistic group. The author states that the finding demonstrates that autistic people have lower capacity to process aesthetic features. It is important to note that this finding does not necessarily indicate an inability to appreciate aesthetic elements. Rather, it might reflect a limitation in the study design.

The above research displays a standardization of aesthetic parameters in the evaluation, non-incorporation of the neurodiversity paradigm, and the presumption that the task performance by neurotypical individuals represents the correct one. Aesthetics encompasses many philosophical and psychological viewpoints. To illustrate this argument, it would not be coherent to conclude an absence of knowledge in Biology solely on performances in Microbiology evaluations, as Biology has many subdisciplines. Future research in autism and aesthetics should, therefore, prioritize addressing the neurodiversity paradigm.

Shaughnessy (2013) offers the closest alignment with the neurodiversity paradigm by conceptualizing the term neurodivergent aesthetics. It emphasizes the unique sensory explorations and autistics' fresh and unencumbered perceptions of the world. It mentions attention to detail, appreciation of specific and unusual qualities in elements, and self-assured thinking are key to understanding those perceptions. Also, it approaches some aspects of autism, comparing them to several artistic approaches. The main difference between Shaughnessy's work and the next analysis of autistic aesthetic experiences is Shaughnessy (2013) focuses on considering "aesthetical" the way neurodivergent minds work and differ from the cultural parameters of neurological functioning, even though the hypothesis of the next analysis agrees with that statement.

Autistic Culture

Autistic academics denominate a distinction between the culture of autism and autistic culture. The first one represents autism as a pathology and leaves them vulnerable to social isolation caused by internalized stigma (Botha, Dibb, & Frost, 2020; Farahar, 2023). Most studies examining the aesthetic perceptions of autistic individuals tend to focus on external viewpoints, which creates implicit bias. The deepness of autistic aesthetic experiences built in the community's indigenous knowledge has not yet been analyzed. To emphasize how autistic individuals perceive the world, it is key to define Autism through a cultural lens rather than medical. When a subject is addressed with cultural competence, it would benefit all interchangers.

Unavoidably, societal forces place every individual in distinctive collectives that are differentiated from other groups (David & Derthick, 2017), shaping

cultures that involve many components. Taylor (1871) considers knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits as aspects that sculpt culture. Individuals who share space have common aspects, as enterprises have their own internal work culture policies that define the organization, or a country where its population share language, a national anthem, history, holidays, or meals. However, subgroups are influenced by a widespread culture. Non-related enterprises that share territory might have independent internal work culture policies, but those independent policies are influenced by the common labor culture in the territory; or a Christian family, influenced by living in a place where Christianity is the predominant religion. Furthermore, there is intragroup variation in each community (Schrauf, 2009). For instance, in countries such as Spain, Belgium, or Switzerland, inhabitants coexist within the same territory yet speak different languages; also, many communities, even sharing the same language, have distinctive accents, dialects, sociolects, idiolects. The complexity of this interactive relations between aspects produces various cultures that create the bases for social systems (Kronenfeld, 2017).

Disturbingly, throughout history, societies have never regarded or considered all social groups for the system functioning (David & Derthick, 2017). Contemporary social sciences continue to investigate the pervasiveness of unconscious bias in how people form biased beliefs and attitudes towards certain groups of individuals. Ethnocentrism played a huge role in this issue and has influenced qualitative research since the legitimization of social studies as sciences. When researchers establish universal laws to explain particular facts, there are seemingly permitted to extract conclusions about cultures that are inaccurate and biased from the perspective of the researcher's own culture (Guber, 2001). As a result, some people experience imposed harmful restrictions, simply because of their social group membership, while others have social advantages and experience privileged enjoyment of human rights.

Cultural Diversity, Social Dynamics, and Autistic Identity

Every form of diversity shares similar social dynamics, including inequality, power dynamics, embracement of identity and community development (Walker, 2021). The Neurodiversity Movement took concrete form at the second half of the 1990 decade, and since then, the neurodiversity

paradigm and autistic culture knowledge have gone through significant adjustments (Pripas-Kapit, 2020). Many autistic groups emerged and due to the globalization phenomenon, life experiences from the perspective of the actual autistic individuals were more noticeable among other autistic people (Davidson, 2008).

Despite personal distinctions and contexts among experiences, many commonalities persist. The autistic neurological functioning system has come to be understood as a valid and valuable difference. The autistic community possesses indigenous knowledge (the neurodiversity paradigm), beliefs, values, practices, understanding of language and communication. This has been built on shared positive and negative experiences between autistic individuals, just as other social groups that share social, political, and lived experiences, such as women, every different person of color communities, the LGBTIQ+ community, etc. (Farahar, 2023). These shared experiences, interests, attitudes, and values among groups of people are the foundation of social and cultural alignment (Murray, 2023).

Cultural differences between autistics and non-autistics create bidirectional challenges in effective understanding and empathy between both groups (Milton, 2012). Neurotypical individuals possess distinct conceptions of the world. As the majority group, they have historically established their sociocultural functioning conceptions as the standard for society functioning. Accordingly, autism has long been described under the medical model, a disorder, a set of deficits, based on those sociocultural standards of normal (Walker, 2021). However, neurotypicality is not a biological phenomenon. Conforming to dominant cultural expectations of brain functioning grants neurotypical people privileges by being considered normal within the prevailing social construct of normalcy.

In autistic culture (and many others), normality is a problematic social construction. Reaño (2023) posits that natural and normal are two different concepts, as nature is ruled by laws and normal is determined by social and cultural conventions. The propositions that a culture is more desirable, and that a single culture is (or should be) the universal default have been demonstrated flawed on ethical and epistemological bases (Walker, 2021). Neurotypicality should not be considered as the model parameter for cultural neurological functioning standards.

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) states that cultural diversity incorporates countless of unique identities of the groups and societies. Tajfel & Turner (1979) proposed the social identity theory, which considers identity to be based in social group membership and imbued with positive aspects that reinforce the sense of self (Islam, 2014). Similarly, within the Autistic community, shared experiences foster a sense of belonging, well-being, and self-acceptance, as members identify with one another (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). Efforts to normalize autistic people constitute a disrespect to the community's cultural practice, as it impacts how its members process, perceive, and communicate with the environment. The analysis demonstrates the accuracy of describing the autistic experience through a cultural lens. This has led to discussions regarding whether the autistic community should be entitled to cultural rights (de Vries, 2021).

Aesthetic Experiences in the Autistic Community

Drawing on the previously discussed theories, the autistic aesthetic experiences could be explored through the lens of sensory processes, cognition, interests, and social interaction. The first mechanism used by human beings to have aesthetic experiences is the senses. The etymological origin of the word *aisthesis* comes from ancient Greek and refers to the ability to sense. This emphasizes that sensory processing is one of the main sources of beauty perception (Shusterman, 2006). Each sociocultural group possesses indigenous knowledge in different areas, shaped by their collective worldview. Autistic individuals communicate, process and experience environment and society different to non-autistics. Acknowledging this difference makes it more plausible to explore the potential differences in autistic and neurotypical aesthetic experiences. However, while sharing the same social group membership, individual differences persist. This heterogeneity presents a challenge in conveying the depth and nature of autistic aesthetic experiences to neurotypical individuals.

The autistic mind is characterized by a heightened focus on detail-oriented processing and pattern recognition within elements, leading to a potentially more intricate understanding of sensory input (Hartman, et al., 2023; Reaño, 2023; Walker, 2021). When these factors align with an individual's interests, even the most minute aspect of the element might become significant and aesthetically pleasing. For instance, consider a hypothetical ceiling border.

Neurotypicals may register it as non-relevant, just a ceiling border, because their understanding of the world does not incorporate a high amount of detail (Hartman, et al., 2023), which translates to the concept of naive experiencing (Cupchik & Winston, 1996). In contrast, autistics could notice patterns in it and create visual figures when its shape is combined with other factors, for example, ambient light or shadow; or the border could remind them a shape seen in another setting or situation. Building on Beardsley (1979) and Cupchik & Winston (1996), this disciplined experiencing of the aesthetic elements fosters a sense of harmony between the elements. This, in turn, contribute to autistic people in making sense of their surroundings, establishing routines, and achieving emotional well-being (Reaño, 2023; Hartman, et al., 2023). This process could lead to the development of conceptual frameworks, potentially shaping new overall interpretations of the environment.

According to Beardsley (1979), a key characteristic of aesthetic experiences involves suppressing attention to surrounding activities in favor of the object of appreciation. Autistic people tend to concentrate on a single element while shadowing others that are not currently the focus of attention. This phenomenon is termed *monotropism* by Murray (2023), and is considered a core aspect of the autistic experience. It is linked to sensory processing, profound interests, and social interaction patterns. While monotropism is multidimensional, its role in aesthetic experiences appears to align with the ideas of Silvia (2012), Beardsley (1979), and Shusterman (2006). Murray (2018) conceived monotropism as a theory based on interests with an emotional link to the individual in a real or imaginative world. It applies when engaging in aesthetic experiences, for example (and not limited to): the sound of water falling, feeling the texture of putty, watching a plasma lamp that creates a mesmerizing display of light, researching and learning about every satellite in Jupiter, and other elements that stimulate senses and cognition. Monotropic states facilitate emotional regulation by filtering out overwhelming environmental stimuli (Burrows, et al., 2021). The depth of focus facilitates the development of new insights and understandings about the world, often leading to skills acquisition.

Individuals might be drawn to specific areas of focus that cater to their unique sensory preferences. The aesthetic elements that align with each autistic's interests are highly stimulating, both sensorially and cognitively.

Although this intense engagement could often make it difficult to refocus on other activities or objects, it plays a crucial role in autistic aesthetic experiences.

Shusterman also (2006) emphasizes that aesthetic judgements are influenced by bodily and emotional sensations. Consequently, the aesthetic experience itself depends on the individual's sensory profile, which indicates each person's patterns of sensory processing and response to stimuli (Dunn, 2001; Hartman, et al., 2023). This variability of sensory profiles leads to different interpretations of the same experience. Aesthetic appreciation thus becomes an individualized truth shaped by each person's unique emotional response. The prior example of the ceiling border represents a specific sensory profile experiencing this situation. Other sensory profiles would apply this behavior in another element, situation, or use different senses. The existence of distinctive sensory profiles support Shusterman's work. Aesthetic experiences are inherently individualized and skeptical due to absence of uniform and universal truth about sensory aesthetic judgement. They are also relativistic, as beauty manifests in diverse forms. These principles likely extend to topics of interest as well.

Hartman et al. (2023) describe the autistic mind as sensory seeking, a phenomenon Walker (2021) terms *stimming*. Charlton et al. (2021) consider this mechanism as aesthetically valuable, because it encompasses a multifaceted nature explained by sensory differences, emotions, and self- regulation. It involves repetitive actions that provide various forms of sensory stimulation. Stimming manifests a spectrum of emotions depending on context, emotional state, and sensory profile, independent of societal and cultural categorizations of these emotions as positive or negative. This sensory seeking mechanism could itself be considered an aesthetic experience, or it might serve as a response to an aesthetic encounter. It denotes the existence of certain sensory stimulus that autistic individuals find intensely enjoyable and would appreciate to experience more frequently. Evidently, it is related to repetition, predictability, familiarity, and, in the words of Beardsley (1979), finding order and coping mechanisms to navigate society in an emotionally regulated state.

Autistic people's interaction styles also hold aesthetic value within their community. Contrary to deficit-based perspectives that portray autistic

individuals as incapable of reciprocal communication, and unlike typical social interactions that prioritize small talk and indirect communication, many within the autistic collective prioritize meaningful relationships and conversations (Hartman, et al., 2023).

Interaction between autistic individuals who shared values, interests and experiences transcend mere enjoyment. They cultivate a sense of self-reflection through the perceived mirroring of the self and the other. This harmonious resonance fosters self-discovery by enabling reevaluation and enrichment of the self, ultimately leading to enhanced self-awareness (Cocking & Kennett, 1998).

Discussion

This article contributes to the neurodiversity paradigm by offering an in-depth exploration of aesthetic experiences, values, and judgments among autistic people. The analyses presented in this work are consistent with the frameworks employed by contemporary Aesthetics experts. Drawing on the analyses before, this article suggests that the autistic community possesses a potentially more unconventional and profound understanding of aesthetic experiences compared to the neurotypical population. This claim is supported by autistic individuals' propensity for detailed engagement and pattern recognition. These tendencies, fueled by sensory perception, imagination, and reason, facilitate the exploration of creativity and knowledge acquisition (Reaño, 2023). Furthermore, monotropism, characterized by the suppression of extraneous stimuli while focusing on a particular element, has a crucial role in facilitating aesthetic experiences. This mechanism triggers emotional, sensory, intellectual, and transformative responses within the individual (Murray, 2018). These neurocognitive processes offer valuable insights into the internal world of autistic individuals.

Within autistic culture, stimming and familiarity are hallmarks of aesthetic experiences. The sense of order and emotional comfort imbues predictability with aesthetic value for autistic individuals, who are also know for heightened sensory seeking tendencies (Hartman, et al., 2023). The autistic community recognizes stimming as a form of aesthetic expression, bringing joy and serving as a daily coping mechanism.

Acknowledging the diversity of sensory profiles, contexts and interests within the autistic community, these analyses highlight how indigenous knowledge about autism informs many cultural aspects that shape the autistic collective. Given the evolving nature of the Neurodiversity Paradigm, future research about Autism and aesthetic experiences is warranted.

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