



## Commentary

# Commentary on Corradi et al.'s (2019) new conception of aesthetic sensitivity: Is the ability conception dead?

Nils Myszkowski<sup>1\*</sup> , Pinar Çelik<sup>2</sup>  and Martin Storme<sup>3,4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Pace University, New York City, New York, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Human Resources, Organization and Labor Economics, Solvay Business School, Brussels, Belgium

<sup>3</sup>Department of People, Organizations and Negotiation, IESEG School of Management, Lille, France

<sup>4</sup>LEM-CNRS 9221, Lille, France

Corradi et al. (*British Journal of Psychology*, 2019) argue that their new conception of visual aesthetic sensitivity (as responsiveness to aesthetic features in one's preferences) presents several advantages in comparison with the current ability view of aesthetic sensitivity, usually defined as the ability to judge aesthetic stimuli in accordance with standards (*The Journal of Psychology*, 1964, 57 and 49). Although the measure they propose is interesting and presents advances to the field, we point to important issues. Notably, the authors conveniently base their comparison between the two conceptions on psychometric double standards, discard a century of research on aesthetic sensitivity by focusing on Eysenck's speculations, and disguise an extension of already existing aesthetic preference tests (e.g., *The Journal of Psychology*, 1952, 33 and 199; *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 2005, 23 and 165) as a redefinition of aesthetic sensitivity. We conclude that both aesthetic preference and aesthetic sensitivity research are legitimate objects of study, that the authors present interesting ideas to further the study of aesthetic preferences, but that their approach is not new and that its proposed renaming only adds confusion to the field.

Corradi *et al.* (2019) propose that the current conception of aesthetic sensitivity – as the ability to identify aesthetic quality in conformity with external standards (e.g., expert consensus) – needs replacement into a new conception: Aesthetic sensitivity should be redefined as the extent to which certain features of a stimulus are used to form a subjective aesthetic judgment. Although their proposed approach has merits, their (unnecessary) comparison is biased in several ways. In the present commentary, we critically review some of the key arguments used to build their case against the ability conception of aesthetic sensitivity.

---

\*Correspondence should be addressed to Nils Myszkowski, Department of Psychology, Pace University, 41 Park Row, Room 1315, New York, NY 10038, USA (email: nmyszkowski@pace.edu).

## Are existing measures of aesthetic sensitivity so bad?

A key argument of the authors against the ability conception of aesthetic sensitivity is the alleged poor psychometric properties of existing tests. Certainly, measures of aesthetic sensitivity are largely imperfect, but most of the authors' claims here are inaccurate or obsolete. The Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Revised, for example, presents good internal consistency, unidimensionality, and structural validity (e.g., Myszkowski & Storme, 2017). Combining its qualities with previous research on the original test, we may add that there is encouraging evidence of cultural measurement invariance as well (e.g., Chan et al., 1980). The authors also point to the correlations between the VAST and other constructs (specifically intelligence) as problematic. We agree that they are not in line with Eysenck's speculations, but they remain a non-issue, because (1) aesthetic sensitivity and intelligence in the visual aesthetic are both parts of the same nomological network (Myszkowski, Çelik, & Storme, 2018) – next to such constructs like figural creativity and openness-related traits – (2) such relations are consistent across tests (Myszkowski *et al.*, 2018), (3) sensory perception tasks in general are correlated with intelligence, and (4) the correlations remain weak to moderate at best – thus maintaining discriminant validity. As a comparison, creativity is often found to hold relations of the same magnitude with intelligence and openness – should we infer from Corradi et. al.'s logic that creativity research should also be abandoned?

More importantly, the authors' attacks severely contrast with their own empirical inquiry. Notably, they do not report (or even suggest to later study) their instrument's internal consistency, dimensionality, or measurement invariance – even though, quite likely, some of these qualities could have been studied in their very sample. Not exposing their instrument to an empirical inquiry using the same canons bases the entire comparison of the authors on double standards.

## Bad measures do not imply bad constructs

More than defending the (perfectible) qualities of visual aesthetic sensitivity tests, we want to point out that, even if these tests had been flawed in their psychometric qualities, this would not discard the *construct* itself, nor its definition. Should we discard intelligence as a construct because one intelligence test is deemed to be psychometrically insufficient? Of course not, because a construct and its measures are different. This brings us to the attacks on the ability construct definition itself.

The authors argue that the ability conception of aesthetic sensitivity is 'meaningful and useful only if beauty is truly an objective value'. Indeed, Eysenck probably believed in an 'objective beauty', a hardly defensible idea philosophically. Still, the existence of an 'objective beauty' is not a necessary condition for the study of aesthetic sensitivity, and thus, this point is irrelevant. Since Thorndike (1916), it has been clearly admitted that the aesthetic value of a stimulus is actually only determined by expert consensus. Also, Child's (1964) definition of aesthetic sensitivity, which is currently the most used for the construct, clearly describes aesthetic sensitivity as the ability to 'judge in relation to external standards', again without claiming objectivity. We believe that investigating the extent to which individuals agree with experts on aesthetic value is interesting both from a fundamental and from an applied perspective, regardless of whether objective beauty exists or not.

Unfortunately, even though the authors briefly mention the history of aesthetic sensitivity research, they largely attack the ability approach of aesthetic sensitivity by

attacking Eysenck's claims. Despite significant contributions to the field, the ability conception predates and postdates Eysenck, as several analogous tests existed before Eysenck (e.g., Thorndike, 1916) – some of them are still in use (e.g., Summerfeldt, Gilbert, & Reynolds, 2015). Further, the commonly used construct definition was provided by Child (1964), not Eysenck. Thus, Eysenck's speculations and beliefs being correct or incorrect are not relevant to the legitimacy of the construct.

### **The authors propose a measure of aesthetic preferences, not aesthetic sensitivity**

The authors themselves acknowledge that their construct be defined as 'the extent to which a given feature influences someone's liking or preference'. But this is really a rephrasing of one's *preference for an aesthetic feature*. The problem is that several aesthetic preference tests – such as the Barron–Welsh Figure Preference Test (1952) or the Preference for Balance Test (Wilson & Chatterjee, 2005) – which, similarly, use stimuli that vary according to a specific feature (e.g., balance) and record the examinee's preference, have been developed: They are simply called aesthetic preference tests. We would concede that the term 'aesthetic sensitivity' is vague enough to accommodate both approaches, but we do not see the point of renaming the study of aesthetic preference – which is thus not new at all – especially when it involves using a name already used for a now century-old (yet still vivid) approach. Why not call this a 'multidimensional aesthetic preference test' instead?

### **Conclusion**

Aesthetic sensitivity has been studied as the ability to identify (consensually/expertly defined) aesthetic value for over a century, is clearly conceptually defined, and is incrementally overcoming its psychometric challenges. Corradi et al.'s work involves manipulating aesthetic features of stimuli and the observation of individual preference: It should therefore be regarded as an aesthetic preference test. The two research interests are not mutually exclusive and both merit scientific inquiry, but the authors' approach should be distinguished from aesthetic sensitivity and is not the revolution that they claim.

### **Conflict of interest**

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **References**

- Barron, F., & Welsh, G. S. (1952). Artistic perception as a possible factor in personality style: Its measurement by a figure preference test. *The Journal of Psychology*, 33(2), 199–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.1952.9712830>
- Chan, J., Eysenck, H. J., & Götz, K. O. (1980). A new visual aesthetic sensitivity test: III. Crosscultural comparison between Hong Kong children and adults, and English and Japanese samples. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 50(3, Pt 2), 1325–1326. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.1980.50.3c.1325>
- Child, I. L. (1964). Observations on the meaning of some measures of esthetic sensitivity. *The Journal of Psychology*, 57(1), 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.1964.9916671>

- Corradi, G., Chuquichambi, E. G., Barrada, J. R., Clemente, A., & Nadal, M. (2019). A new conception of visual aesthetic sensitivity. *British Journal of Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12427>
- Myszkowski, N., Çelik, P., & Storme, M. (2018). A meta-analysis of the relationship between intelligence and visual “taste” measures. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, *12*(1), 24–33. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000099>.
- Myszkowski, N., & Storme, M. (2017). Measuring “Good Taste” with the visual aesthetic sensitivity test-revised (VAST-R). *Personality and Individual Differences*, *117*, 91–100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.05.041>.
- Summerfeldt, L. J., Gilbert, S. J., & Reynolds, M. (2015). Incompleteness, aesthetic sensitivity, and the obsessive-compulsive need for symmetry. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, *49*(Part B), 141–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbtep.2015.03.006>
- Thorndike, E. L. (1916). Tests of esthetic appreciation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *7*(9), 509–522.
- Wilson, A., & Chatterjee, A. (2005). The assessment of preference for balance: Introducing a new test. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, *23*(2), 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.2190/B1LR-MVF3-F36X-XR64>

Received 28 October 2019; revised version received 13 January 2020