Empathy and Engagement with Beauty

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This study examined the relationship between engagement with beauty and empathy. It is a refinement study, in that at least 44 studies have been published in *JSP* that focus on empathy, ranging from medical students and empathy (Hojat, Mangione, Nasca, Gonnella, & Magee, 2005) to theatre acting and empathy (Metcalf, 1931). Yet no study of empathy and engagement with beauty has been published. In particular, we are interested in the relationship between empathic concern and the socio-moral phenomenon of engagement with moral beauty, that is, the ability to appreciate beauty in human virtue and action (viz. Haidt & Keltner, 2004). We predict that empathy will correlate more strongly with a measure of engagement with moral beauty, than with measures of engagement with natural or artistic beauty.

A convenience sample of *N* = 128 students (68.8% female) from Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho completed the Empathetic Concern (EC) subscale of the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980, 1994) and the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS; Diessner, et al., 2008); the two measures were randomly ordered to prevent a sequencing effect. The EC is a 7-item scale intended to measure feelings of concern, compassion and warmth for other human beings (Davis, 1980). Davis reports *α*’s of .70-.72 for the EC, and describes various validity indices for it (Davis, 1983a, 1983b, 1994); in our current study the *α* was .77. The EBS is a 14-item self-report scale describing various levels of cognitive and emotional engagement with natural, artistic, and moral beauty. EBS total score *α* has been reported as .91; its Natural Beauty, Artistic Beauty and Moral Beauty subscales *α* range from .80-.89 (Diessner, Solom, Frost, Parsons, & Davidson, 2008); the *α*s in this current study were .90 for total score and .75-.91 for the subscales. A variety of studies have demonstrated the EBS’s predictive, convergent, and discriminant validity (Diessner, et al., 2008; Diessner, Rust, Solom, Frost, & Parsons, 2006; Diessner, Davis, & Toney, in press). International studies with the EBS in Iran, Samoa, Germany, Cyprus, Croatia, and America show it has strong *α*s in various translations, and a similar factor structure across cultures (Richel et al., 2008; Susnjic & Diessner, 2008).

The correlation between EBS total score and Empathy Concern (EC) score was *r* = .46 (*p* < .001); between EBS Natural Beauty subscale and EC, *r* = .31 (*p* < .001); between EBS Artistic Beauty subscale and EC, *r* = .28 (*p* = .001); and between EBS Moral Beauty subscale and EC, *r* = .47 (*p* < .001).

This study shows empathy and engagement with beauty to be closely connected, with an *r* = .46
being on the upper end of medium-sized correlations. As predicted, empathy correlated higher with engagement with moral beauty ($r = .47$) than with natural ($r = .31$) or artistic beauty ($r = .28$). It seems to makes sense that those who are able to place themselves compassionately in another’s shoes may experience the moral emotion of elevation through the appreciation of the beauty of the moral actions and virtues of others (cf. Haidt, 2003).
References


reliability studies of the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS). Poster session presented at the International Counseling Psychology Conference, Chicago, IL.