Abstract

Artists as a group are different from non-artists in many ways. Most people recognize this quite implicitly. By the term ‘artists’ I refer to those practicing any of the fine, performing, literary or visual arts. They are different from non-artists in their talents and special abilities, their personalities, their mental make-up and even their growing up/practicing environments.

The purpose of this research is to paint a picture of the artistic mind. How the study attempts to do this is by locating a theoretical standpoint from which to view the artistic mind, by interviewing practicing artists and studying the biographic information of some of the leading artists of the twentieth century. Existing literature in the realm of psychology considers art in a number of different ways. One stream of research explores the therapeutic value of art. Another body of literature is devoted to studying the creative process hoping to transfer some of the methods and practices into everyday life for better problem-solving. Yet another line of study applies what is known in psychology to help improve the performance of artists. Apart from these, there is the study of creative individuals and gifted individuals which somewhat tends to overlap with the study of artistic individuals. There has also been much applied research devoted to exploring the non-art benefits of art such as improved self-esteem, better interpersonal skills, improved verbal and mathematical reasoning, etc. Sociologically, art is examined for its role and function in society, as a symbolic form of expression, as a cultural phenomenon and as a tool that challenges or reinforces social norms and trends. But there is very little research on the artist himself/herself. By trying to describe the artistic mind, the study attempts to bridge some part of that gap.

Since the primary interest of the study is around creating a mental profile of the artist, the literature reviewed covers the dominant theories of mental ability, the links drawn in research between mental ability and artistry through the ages, and narrows down to the one theory of cognitive functioning that directly addresses the phenomenon of artistic ability. Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences is used as a peg on which to hang some of the findings of this research since its diversified view of mental ability allows us to apply the theory to draw a profile of the artistic mind. Gardner (2003) postulated that intelligence is not unitary and that there are seven independently functioning intelligences – Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Visual-Spatial, Kinesthetic, Musical, Interpersonal and Intrapersonal. Later on he added an eighth intelligence – Naturalist. Over the last thirty years, support has been building for the theory in terms of validity studies and applied research projects and the theory accords well with the eastern, especially the Indian conception of intelligence.

The measurement of the multiple intelligences was a major challenge involved in using this theoretical framework to profile artists. Traditional measures of mental ability call for
performance tests that involve solving number or word problems, cracking logic puzzles or reasoning with images. But the broad definition of intelligence within MI theory blurs the line between personality and mental ability, between skillful performance and pure ability/potential and between the abstraction of intelligence and its concrete manifestations. Most support for MI theory comes from classrooms around the world rather than through empirical measurement and the only ‘tests’ that provide statistical support for MI theory are in the form of self-report questionnaires. To resolve this dilemma of measurement and identify the way forward, a questionnaire was created to tap into the different intelligences and was tried out in the first phase of the study on undergraduate students.

The 126 students who participated in the preliminary study were students from the final year at SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Mumbai. The data showed that the questionnaire differentiated between individuals on each intelligence, but was unsuitable for factor analysis, showing that it did not efficiently differentiate between the intelligences for an individual. This was primarily because of the different manifestations of each intelligence that the scale attempted to tap into. The ‘dance’ items for example, did not correlate with the ‘sport items’ and the ‘math’ items did not correlate with the ‘logic’ items, although theoretically, sport and dance both manifest kinesthetic intelligence and logic is an extension of math. A relationship was however found between hobbies practiced and intelligence scores and between parental educational level and pursuit of extra-curricular activities. This indicated the importance of the home environment in shaping the development of any intelligence. Additionally, some of the answers to the open-ended questions indicated that at this point in time, for college students, their choices and their intelligences are as yet only emergent, and if the mental profile of an artist needs to be drawn up, the study needs to center on more experienced practicing artists in whom presumably the intelligences would be more differentiated.

Based on the results of the preliminary field study, the methodology for the research was charted out. The questionnaire was redesigned for use within an interview context and an entirely qualitative approach adopted to understand the making of the artist since the questions concerned the how and why rather than what and how much. The sample chosen for interviews was a more mature group (21 artists) and a biographic study of some major Indian artists of the 20th century (12 artists) was undertaken to support the data generated through interviews. The method of sampling used was theoretical sampling and ten different art forms were covered—Music, Dance, Painting, Film, Photography, Sculpture, Poetry/Literature, Pottery, Theatre and Design. Three negative cases are analyzed (i.e. individuals who chose to not become artists despite having had artistic training and artistic family background) for disconfirming evidence.

Analysis of the interview data suggests that for artists, linguistic, logical-mathematical and naturalist intelligences are not very relevant. What emerged as core to the profile of the artistic mind was musical intelligence, followed by kinesthetic intelligence. Visual-spatial intelligence
was very important in arts that directly applied that intelligence such as painting, sculpture, pottery, choreography, and film. The scores on the personal intelligences were overall high for the group suggesting that those intelligences were relevant too in successful artists, but probably only as relevant as they are to success in all domains. This pattern was supported by analysis of biographical information of the great artists. Interview data also suggested an influence of learning, practice and exposure on the development of the multiple intelligences.

While the primary focus of the research was on the artistic mind, there was some data in the interviews as well as in the biographies which describes the artistic personality. On analysis, this emerged as a subset of the creative personality identified by earlier research. Specifically, the factors that were important were Artistic Identity, Independence/ Autonomy, Dealing with Uncertainty/ Risk-taking, Tenacity/ Challenge, Flexibility, Novelty/ Variety-seeking, Pride in their work and Authenticity.

An interesting part of the interviews was that it permitted a lot of discovery around the process of becoming an artist. The data from interviews and biographies suggests that there is a definite decision-making process that goes into the making of an artist and there were some insights generated around this point of artistic choice. Irrespective of the age at which training in an art form started, individuals chose to become artists, that is, they committed to being an artist/ living life as an artist anytime between the ages of 8-18 years, usually in the late school years or toward the end of adolescence. This decision was often preceded by or coincided with significant crystallizing experiences. These findings align well with theories of human development, especially Erik Erikson’s description of the search for identity.

A good part of the analysis is also devoted to the artistic environment – factors in the immediate family and social environment that contributed towards the making of the artist. Artistic heritage was significant in its impact on the age at which formal training started and the family/ parents’ involvement in a field that would receive the art work was important in helping artistic commitment translate into artistic achievement. Based on the findings, a model for artistic development is proposed.