Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. The Research Problem

Artists as a group are different from non-artists in many ways. Most people recognize these differences 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, in their personality characteristics, their training, their mental make-up and even their growing-up environments. The broad purpose of this research is to understand artists better.

But artists themselves are a very heterogeneous group. There are a few who are at the very top of their fields, who enjoy a celebrity status even outside the art world. These individuals have more often than not dedicated their entire lives to the perpetuation of a form and have succeeded in making domain changing contributions to the art field. For example, Padma Subhramanyam created a new grammar for a dance form she calls Bharata Nrityam. Rukmini Devi Arundale was responsible for the setting up of Kalakshetra and the present day format of Bharatanatyam performance. M.F. Hussain practically defined avant-garde art in India. There are still others at the forefront of their respective domains, who are widely recognized for exceptional performance such as Lata Mangeshkar for her incomparable voice and range, Amitabh Bachchan for his intense portrayal of characters, M.S. Subbulakshmi for her flawless rendition and clarity, Birju Maharaj for his engaging style and outstanding skill and many others. Considered maestros even within their lifetimes, they are all exceptional in their chosen idiom. At the other end of the spectrum are those who dabble with art. Individuals, who may use art in their everyday lives to create a flower arrangement, decorate a photo album, sing for their own pleasure, work on a child’s school project, or dance at a party. Art is used here either recreationally, as social glue or to lend an aesthetic feel to everyday activities. There may be limited training involved in developing skills related to an art form, but the functionality of art is really much more important for this group.

When speaking of artists in this study, I refer to those who practice their art at a professional level, who are extremely proficient and have invested at least two decades to explore their chosen media, who are at the cutting edge of their respective domains, and have received substantial recognition from society for their art. Interviews with such artists are supplemented by a biographic study of some of the leading Indian artists of the twentieth century. The primary focus is kept slightly away from maestros and legendary artists for two reasons. One, I believe that they are exceptions to the rule, even within their own fields. They are outstanding in their skill as artists, but also possibly in their outlook and personality as people and perhaps even in their life circumstances. Two, their contributions must necessarily be studied post-facto since most of their
life’s work is over. Even so, any study of artists would be incomplete without reference to and validation from the life histories of the doyens of the art scene and hence, their biographies are used as supplementary data. I have not included hobbyists as they are not uniformly identified as artists by society, and because they are unlikely to be sufficiently immersed in an artistic domain to meaningfully share insights about their own development as artists. This research therefore, is about artists, who are competent and acknowledged as such by society. Such artists are different from non-artists in a variety of ways. In trawling through earlier research on artistic ability, I found that there were continuous links drawn between artistic ability and mental ability, especially intelligence (e.g. Vernon, Adamson and Vernon [1977], Clark and Zimmerman [1984]) and hence chose to study the mind of the artist. Since there was very little existing research on this particular topic, the study took on an exploratory nature with the objective of describing the mind of the artist.

The context for the interviews is Mumbai, India, although the arts covered are not necessarily traditional Indian arts (I also include Film, Photography and Theatre among the arts studied). The geographical limitation was imposed because the study was exploratory, and Mumbai arguably being one of the most cosmopolitan cities in India it was possible to include a fair amount of social diversity in the group studied. In case of the biographies, this restriction was not required as the data was drawn entirely from published text. In framing the research problem I found that it is difficult to isolate the artistic mind from the context in which it develops. The story of an individual’s artistic development is the story of his/her life and a description of the artistic mind could only be understood through manifestations of those abilities in the artist’s life. Therefore, the research also includes an inquiry into the circumstances that shaped the artist, the factors that influenced important choices and significant others who influenced the artist’s life. This research could therefore be characterized as an inquiry into the artistic mind and the circumstances and choices that caused the artist to become an artist.

1.2 Theoretical anchors

There have been many challenges in putting this piece of research together. It took a long time to define the topic and the research problem. Wading through literature pertaining to the arts, it took several iterations to arrive at an area of work that made sense from the research perspective and was personally meaningful as well. Even so, the problem arrived at was hazy, with flexible boundaries that stray into several streams of thought and academic disciplines. The study of human mental ability has by and large remained a subject favored by psychologists and to some extent educationists. So a study of the artistic mind would feature under the broad umbrella of psychology. The model of mental ability that has been most dominant in psychology since the early 1900s is built primarily based on the statistical presence of general intelligence (g) in all
other aspects of cognitive functioning, measured by tests such as verbal comprehension, verbal fluency, perceptual speed, numerical reasoning and so on. Researchers in the ‘g camp’ not only claim that g exists, but that it is very important in practical living. Extensive data has been reported correlating g negatively with variables such as unemployment, divorce, having illegitimate children, poverty, incarceration and school drop out rates and positively with variables such as income and socio-economic status (e.g. Gottfredson [1998], Hernstein and Murray [1994]). They also claim that g is largely inherited. The history of research on g is fraught with controversy with many scholars taking objection to what they believed was a discriminatory slant to intelligence research and many alternative models have been proposed (e.g. McCleland 1973, Gould 1981, Sternberg 1985, 2004).

Discontent with the unitary view of intelligence led to several theories of multiple intelligences coming to the fore especially in the 1980s, including a theory proposed by Howard Gardner (1983) that described intelligence as ‘the ability to solve problems or create products that would be valued in at least one culture’. Of all the theories Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligence (MI theory) is the one which most directly addresses the question of artistic ability. Since MI theory evolved from work that Gardner and his colleagues did on Project Zero an initiative that supports the integration of arts in school education, it is natural that the structure of the theory itself should account for a variety of mental abilities not traditionally classified as intelligence. Since it is more inclusive, it permits an analysis of mental profiles (as against a single IQ score) of individuals including artists, which is one of the things that this research aims to do. MI theory is hence used as a frame of reference when inquiring into patterns of the artistic mind. What does the artistic mind look like? Is it that people with certain cognitive gifts become artists? For example, are painters actually more gifted in terms of visual-spatial intelligence than other artists? Or are dancers more kinesthetically tuned? Are there factors common to the mental profiles of all artists irrespective of the type of art they practice? Or do the answers lie in a suitable family and social environment implying that intelligence can grow and change as a result of developmental experiences? These are some of the questions that this study attempts to answer.

However, the deeper I delved into MI theory, the more I found that the theory flowers on a bed of social influences, cultural context and learning. The element of interaction with the environment is a strong feature of MI theory and is also an integral part of the questions that this research attempts to address. Moreover, art itself gets defined as art only within a social context. Identifying an individual as an artist requires some agreement between members of an art-world and society in general that the person in question has produced some artistic work of value. Therefore, while it is possible to say that this research has its roots in psychology, it is also true that it draws nourishment from other related social theory, especially to explain facts about the immediate family and social environment surrounding the artist.
When we talk of mental ability and intelligence, the classic Nature vs. Nurture controversy comes up immediately. There is the matter of innate talent which expresses itself very early in the lives of prodigious artists, but many theorists (for example Howard Gardner) hold that this is a function of their early cultural environment. While equally gifted in linguistic ability, one may choose to express oneself either by writing a poem or through arguing cases in a court of law – and whether one chooses to or not is a result of life experiences, opportunities and other influencing factors. In this research I do not attempt to identify what proportion of talent is hereditary and what proportion is a function of the early growing up environment. If art is there in the immediate family, I take it as a given heritage whether through gene pool or socialization, and consider the impact of that heritage on artistic achievement.

I hesitate to position this research as an exploration of creativity because creativity would need to be studied across artists, scientists, leaders and various people using innovative thinking in widely differing fields. Further, while some artists might be amazingly creative and while some creative people might be artists, there is a large number from each group that lies outside this intersection. Here, the artist is the focal point of understanding; the questions to be answered are the hows and whys of being an artist; it matters less whether the art produced is creative or not. The one place where there was a definite overlap between the two areas was in the description of the artistic personality that emerged during this research. The personality characteristics of the artist that came up were a subset of the creative personality identified by earlier research (e.g. Panda [2011], Sternberg [2006], Ivcevic and Mayer [2006], Csikszentmihalyi [1996], Gardner [1993], Rethi Devi [1993], Sternberg and Lubart [1993], Pathak [1989]). However, the emergence of the artistic personality was only incidental to the inquiry into the artistic mind. Just as creativity is a domain of study different from the study of artists, so is the research on exceptional individuals different from the study of artists. Again, there is an overlap between gifted individuals and artistic individuals. Some gifted individuals are artistic and some artists are truly exceptional. It is very likely that the same factors that make an artist exceptional underlie exceptionality in all fields of human endeavor. These factors have been researched in detail (e.g. Renzulli’s (1978) three ring definition of giftedness, Gagne’s (2000) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent) and feature extensively in more popular literature too (e.g. Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Outliers). Giftedness is therefore not the focal point of this research, artistry is.

1.3. Background and rationale for this research

The rationale for choosing this particular area for research is two-fold. First, it is an attempt to partially fill a gap identified in existing research. The surge of interest in the western world, especially America, to include arts in mainstream education has focused on the benefits of art,
especially non-art benefits such as improved reasoning, better verbal skills, and improved numerical ability. ‘Critical Links’ (Deasy Eds. 2002) an Arts Education Partnership publication that includes multiple studies across the United States documents the academic and social development benefits of art education. Some of the findings shared suggest that music can have an impact on spatial-temporal reasoning, drama on verbal skills, interpersonal skills and even intrapersonal skills, dance on self-confidence, persistence and social tolerance. Project Zero’s REAP (Reviewing Education and the Arts project) conducted a meta-analysis of studies done in this area (Winner and Hetland Eds. 2000) and reported similar results. But there has not been much research on the artistic mind itself. Understanding the artistic mind and the development of the artist might make it easier to spot such a mind in the making in children and young adults and open up possibilities in the arts as an option for living. For those so inclined, being involved in an art can be an extremely fulfilling experience irrespective of whether they choose to practice their art commercially. Understanding the mind of the artist could also help build bridges between the arts and other disciplines such as education and management. Research in these areas still has a long way to go to catch up with the pace of practice and data based perspectives are required. Once the artistic mind is defined, it will be possible to research its correlates – perhaps problem-solving, decision-making, life satisfaction, attrition, motivation and several other behaviors that make a difference to daily life.

Second, this research has been extremely meaningful to me on a personal level. Having invested over thirty years in the discipline of Indian classical dance, I often wonder what makes me and others like me continue to put in so much of ourselves into a form with little material reward. Are we just fulfilling the script of our genetic and social inheritance? My family on both parental sides has a long history of involvement with the arts. My great grandfather on my mother’s side was a celebrated dancer; his wife was a student of Raja Ravi Verma and earned her living as a drawing teacher. My grand-aunt was an accomplished musician. A paternal aunt of mine is a music teacher. Several aunts, uncles and cousins are involved with various art forms, many on a professional level. Closer home, my mother is a published author and dramatist in Tamil, she is a gifted artist especially in portraiture with pencil and charcoal, she used to until recently be able to sing to a concert level and in her younger days was a dancer who performed professionally all over the world. She was my first teacher and I made my debut as a dancer at age four. Did I ever have a choice about being an artist? I was curious to understand the process by which people choose to become artists, a reflection of my inward journey perhaps. The congruence between my personal quest and research concerns therefore prompted me to inquire into the artistic mind.
1.4. Research Objectives and Methodology

The objective of this research is to understand whether there are any common patterns in the MI profiles of artists that reflect the possibility of an artistic mind. The impact of the immediate family and social environment on the development of the artist is also considered, and the process by which the artist became an artist is examined. Since the questions are more concerned with why and how rather than what and how much, the research approach chosen is predominantly qualitative. Field data collected from college students stressed the importance of family background on the development of the intelligences and the need to investigate the role of important life experiences (especially crystallizing and paralyzing experiences) in artistic development. Hence, a conversation was taken up with mid-career practicing artists, which included completion of an MI questionnaire and in-depth interviews about their lives, work and choices. The method of sampling was theoretical sampling and twenty one artists were interviewed. Ten different art forms were covered– Music, Dance, Painting, Film, Photography, Sculpture, Poetry/ Literature, Pottery, Theatre and Design and three negative cases were analyzed (i.e. individuals who chose to not become artists despite having had artistic training and artistic family background) for disconfirming evidence. The interviews were supplemented by observation of the artists work.

A second part of the research was the biographical study of some of the leading Indian artists of the twentieth century. Here also, theoretical sampling was used to select the artists profiled. The analysis of data ran side-by-side with the data collection with analytical categories emerging right from the first interview. The themes that emerged from each interview were compiled into a laundry list and then fine-tuned by comparing examples of each theme across cases. The interview data was the primary focus of analysis and the biographies were used to strengthen the concepts and hypotheses emerging from the interviews. Multiple sources of data helped to create a picture of the artistic mind and even extend the analysis to propose a tentative model for artistic development.

1.5. Chapter Organization

The dialogue between existing research literature and the data generated by this study has been ongoing. Some of the literature review was done as part of scoping the research and the rest as an explanation for some of the observed data. The literature linking mental ability and artistic ability and pertaining to the MI framework is captured in Chapter two. Chapter three details the methodology of the study which is qualitative, involving simultaneous data collection and analysis, creation of analytic categories from the data, and focused on developing a theory about
artistic ability. Chapter four discusses the artistic mind. This discussion is built on the MI questionnaire scores, interview data and biographical study and indicates that ‘artistic intelligence’ may be an identifiable construct. The artistic personality was not a focus of this study, but several points emerged in the interviews and biographies that relate to personality characteristics, especially traits of artists. Although these are not exhaustive, the findings are discussed in Chapter five on the artistic personality. Several interesting insights pertaining to the process of becoming an artist centered on the choice point in life when the artist committed to his/her art. The discussion captured in Chapter six on the artistic choice covers the timing of the choice and the role of crystallizing and paralyzing influences in the choice process. Chapter seven describes the artistic environment, specifically the role of family and immediate social environment in helping the artist access the domain of choice as well as a suitable field where the artistic work will be received. Chapter eight pulls together the insights of this research into a three-stage model that outlines the factors impacting artistic development.