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Incompleteness, aesthetic sensitivity, and the obsessive-compulsive need for symmetry



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ABSTRACT

Background and objectives: The “need for symmetry” is a well recognized yet little understood feature of obsessive-compulsive (OC) experience. In light of the strong associations between the OC-related trait of incompleteness and symmetry-related behaviors and symptoms, and between perceptual symmetry and aesthetic judgments, this study examined whether trait incompleteness is associated with enhanced natural aesthetic skill and/or aesthetic sensitivity, particularly as they pertain to visual symmetry.

Methods: A quasi-experimental design was used to compare the responses of nonclinical individuals with high versus average levels of trait incompleteness on self-report measures and two performance measures of aesthetic judgment.

Results: Compared to controls, participants high in incompleteness reported higher levels of self-perceived symmetry-related concerns and behaviors, and displayed greater aesthetic sensitivity in the form of substantially heightened preferences for symmetry in images. Contrary to the hypothesis relating to aesthetic skill, however, the two groups did not differ in their capacity to estimate accurately the objective aesthetic value of images. Nor did they differ in self-reported aesthetics interests and background.

Limitations: A clinical sample was not included.

Conclusions: Findings provide evidence that high trait incompleteness is associated not just with symptomatic symmetry-related concerns but with a nonspecific heightened preference for visual symmetry. Conceptual implications are discussed, particularly the potential value of the perceptual fluency theory of symmetry and aesthetic response for explaining the association between incompleteness and symmetry preferences and symptoms.

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1. Introduction

The *need for symmetry* is a customary term used to describe a well recognized yet little understood aspect of obsessive-compulsive (OC) experience. Though its manifestations have diverse and often idiosyncratic content, their form is remarkably invariant. In studies of obsessive-compulsive symptom structure, symmetry-related obsessions (with ordering and arranging compulsions, i.e., *symmetry and ordering*) define one of the most robust symptom factors (see Bloch, Landeros-Weisenberger, Rosario, Pit-tenger, & Leckman, 2008). In similar form, it continues into the nonclinical population (Radomsky & Rachman, 2004).

Research also suggests that this symptom type has special etiological significance. There is evidence that neural circuitry implicated in symmetry symptoms is in part unique from other OC symptoms (van den Heuvel et al., 2009). These symptoms appear early in the life course of OC disorder (OCD), and so may be a meaningful vulnerability marker. In a prospective investigation of the naturalistic course of OCD, Pinto, Mancebo, Eisen, Pagano, and Rasmussen (2006) found that symmetry obsessions were the most common “first noticed” symptom. Symmetry, ordering and arranging are among the more prevalent (Evans et al., 1997; Kichuk et al., 2013) and co-occurring (Delorme et al., 2006; McKay et al., 2006) symptoms of childhood-onset OCD. In addition, familial studies of OCD have found symmetry and ordering symptoms in probands to predict greater odds of having family members with those symptoms and/or affected with OC-related disorders (Alsobrook, Leckman, Goodman, Rasmussen, & Pauls, 1999; Hassler et al., 2007; Leckman et al., 2003).

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In order to understand the OC need for symmetry it is important to distinguish between overt symptoms and the motivations behind them. Though symmetry concerns can be driven by the need to avoid, prevent, or offset harm – symmetry obsessions “with” as opposed to those “without” magical thinking (e.g., Goodman et al., 1989) – this is not the most usual presentation (see Pinto et al., 2008). These symptoms instead seem to be largely motivated by the need to correct a sense of *incompleteness*, a plaguing dissatisfaction with whether one’s perceptions, actions, or intentions have been adequately achieved (e.g., Rasmussen & Eisen, 1988, 1990; Summerfeldt, 2004), widely known as a “not-just-right” experience (NJRE; Coles, Frost, Heimberg, & Rhéaume, 2003; Leckman, Walker, Goodman, Pauls, & Cohen, 1994). Our group has proposed that two core dimensions underlie OC symptoms – harm avoidance and incompleteness – with the latter playing a key role in symmetry-related behaviors. Indeed, research has shown symmetry and ordering to be predicted exclusively by incompleteness in clinical (Ecker & Gönner, 2008) and nonclinical (Pietrefesa & Coles, 2008; see also Radomsky & Rachman, 2004) samples.

Symmetry-related symptoms have received surprisingly little research attention. One exception is the seminal work of Radomsky and Rachman (2004), which provided a characterization of, and measurement tool for, symmetry, ordering, and arranging behaviors. These researchers found that nonclinical participants’ self-perceived levels of everyday symmetry and ordering significantly predicted their discomfort and preferences for order in response to lab-based tasks in which the degree of disorder was manipulated. Using similar methods, Coles, Heimberg, Frost, and Steketee (2005) obtained comparable findings in studies of in vivo NJREs. These experimenters manipulated levels of disorder using familiar objects (e.g., a neatly arranged bookshelf, a dirty disarrayed rug), and found that participants high in self-reported incompleteness/NJREs reported significantly greater discomfort in response to disorder than did controls.

Though this thoughtful body of research has demonstrated the link between incompleteness and preference for order, it is important to recognize that it was not designed to be sensitive to preference for symmetry per se. In line with Radomsky and Rachman’s (2004, p. 896) observation that OC concerns about symmetry are usually accompanied by more general preferences for orderliness, these studies all used naturalistic scenarios to operationalize order/disorder. Though ecologically valid, this means that though symmetry can be inferred, it is imbedded among other construable features – messiness, neglect, and dirtiness, for example – all of which plausibly have experience-based cognitive and emotional associations (e.g., repugnance, disgust, anxiety) which make it difficult to draw conclusions about the role played by symmetry (or even “order”, see Gombrich, 1979), as a basic perceptual property.

A better understanding of the nature, or even veracity, of the OC “need for symmetry” is worth pursuing. It would inform our continued use of the term on grounds other than phenomenological fit and descriptive expediency. It would allow for consideration of the usefulness of theories developed for explaining universal preferences for perceptual symmetry, such as in its evolutionary adaptiveness and resultant encoding in perceptual systems (e.g., Enquist & Arak, 1994; Reber, 2002). It would also aid evaluation of the usefulness of prevailing cognitive-appraisal models of OC symptoms, which hold that atypical responses to symmetry/asymmetry are to be expected only insofar as it is appraised as personally salient (see Rachman, 1997, 1998). Finally, it would permit comparisons and theory-knitting among OCD and other psychopathologies characterized by perceptual sensitivity to symmetry, such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) (see Veale & Lambrou, 2002) and the autism spectrum (e.g., Perreault, Gurnsey, Dawson, Mottron, & Bertone, 2011).

A leading source of insight about how humans respond to perceptual symmetry is the field of empirical aesthetics. Weyl

(1952) observed that “beauty is bound up with symmetry” (p. 3), and extensive research indeed indicates that of all visual pattern parameters, symmetry is the foremost predictor of judgments of aesthetic appeal (e.g., Gartus & Leder, 2013; Jacobsen & Höfel, 2002; Tinio & Leder, 2009). Symmetry in aesthetics has both narrow and broad definitions (Weyl, 1952), including simple geometric (e.g., “mirror”) symmetry and symmetry in the more general sense, which entails *balance* – the arrangement of elements to achieve the greatest mutual harmony, with symmetry being “the simplest form of balance” (Wilson & Chatterjee, 2005, p. 166). Attunement to symmetry, then, is key to humans’ aesthetic sense.

Personality researchers have given considerable attention to the possibility that some people have naturally heightened aesthetic judgment or “appreciation” (e.g., Eysenck, 1940, 1972; Myszkowski, Storme, Zenasni, & Lubart, 2014; see Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2005). The link between this attribute and OC phenomena has been proposed by Veale and colleagues, in their work on BDD. This drew upon Harris’ (1982) suggestion that the hyper-awareness of appearance imperfections in BDD patients may arise from their “aestheticity”, comprising both aesthetic *perceptual skills* (an ability) and aesthetic *emotional sensitivity*. Veale, Ennis, and Lambrou (2002) found that compared to individuals with other psychiatric diagnoses, those with BDD were five times more likely to have aesthetic interests and skills, evidenced by an education or occupation in art and design. In a quasi-experimental study in which symmetry of images was manipulated, Lambrou, Veale, and Wilson (2011) found further evidence of enhanced aestheticity in BDD, in the form of perceptual acuity for symmetry in face and non-face stimuli, similar to a comparison group of individuals with an arts and design background. These authors allude to the possibility that heightened aestheticity may extend to the more general OC need for symmetry, and also, importantly, that incompleteness may be the bridge between them (Veale & Lambrou, 2002, p. 430).

These converging lines of research and theory suggest that trait incompleteness may be associated with heightened natural aesthetic judgment, in the form of a greater attunement to and preference for perceptual symmetry. It is important to be clear in our conceptualizations of aesthetic judgment, as there is variability in how it has been termed and understood. For the present study two distinct facets are relevant. The first is what might be best considered aesthetic ability or *skill*, as expressed in the person’s capacity to match their judgments with the objective empirical qualities or “good” design of objects (see Child, 1964). From this perspective, certain properties combine to give an object a “true” aesthetic value, and the ability to discern these accurately is key to aesthetic judgment (e.g., Graves, 1948; see also Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004). This aspect of aesthetic judgment is explicit, articulable, and as empirically based and quantifiable as judgments of physical attributes like color or size. This emphasis, however, is at odds with a vast philosophical literature on aesthetic judgment differentiating it from empirical judgments due to its ineffable sensory and emotional qualities (see Zangwill, 2014). From this perspective, aesthetic perception is implicit, instantaneous, and not reducible to an evaluation of an object’s physical properties. One can have a heightened attunement to and appreciation for the aesthetic, without knowing, or being able to articulate, why. To contrast it with aesthetic *skill*, this can be described as aesthetic *sensitivity* (e.g. Eysenck, 1972).¹

¹ Not all uses of the term “sensitivity” distinguish it from skill in this way. Lambrou et al. (2011) labeled both emotional response and explicit evaluation of properties as sensitivities (emotional versus perceptual). Different terms, moreover, are used to make a similar distinction (e.g., Leder et al., (2004) differentiate between aesthetic response and judgment). A full discussion of these often subtle differences is beyond the scope of this paper.

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