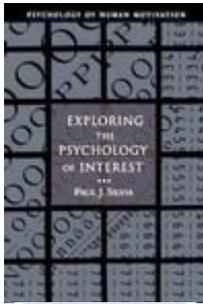


What Makes Something Interesting?

A review of



Exploring the Psychology of Interest

by Paul J. Silvia

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Reviewed by
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☞ If you ask anyone what makes people do what they do, he or she will probably answer, "Interest," as one of the most likely explanations. Psychology is about people's behavior, and one might expect it to deal extensively with interest, yet the scientific analysis of interest has been slow to develop. Part of the reason is probably the mentalistic flavor of the concept, which made it suspect in the eyes of many behaviorists. When the cognitive revolution changed the scene, interest might have been too close to emotion to be in focus. In addition, it is remarkable that emotion theories have been slow to acknowledge that interest belongs to their realm, possibly because it seemed to be devoid of obvious somatic connections. In this way, a concept that always seemed central to folk psychology had to spend a long time in the cold before it was finally allowed as a legitimate and important field of study.

☞ There has been a lack of a modern text that reviews research on interest. Now Paul J. Silvia has written a fascinating book about the concept. He covers the development from Berlyne's (1960) work on curiosity in the 1950s and 1960s and Tomkins's (1962) introduction of the idea that interest is an emotion through the most recent research in several fields of basic and applied psychology. He attempts to achieve an integration of the diverse traditions and describes an interesting new theory of interest, and his book takes the field a large step forward.

☞ Much of the work discussed by Silvia refers to curiosity rather than interest. The two concepts may refer to different psychological processes that are reflected in their semantics, but so far there has been no convincing empirical research supporting the distinction. Silvia treats them as synonyms, and so did Berlyne. In the present review, I also treat them as referring to the same psychological processes and do not discuss the distinction further.

Interest as Emotion

—Silvia's most basic assumption is that interest is an emotion. He claims that Tomkins was the first to consider interest as an emotion. There is little attention in his book to work before Tomkins, or to European work for that matter, with the exception of Berlyne. A search of the PsycLIT database reveals a number of articles relevant to emotion and interest published around 1900. Older classics undoubtedly also exist, but Silvia does not go deeply into the historical roots of the concept. He does mention Herbart (1816/1891; Hilgenheger, 1993) and Dewey (1913) for their educational applications of the concept—they saw interest as being of crucial importance for education but did not consider the emotional aspect of interest to be the most important one.

—More historical analysis could have been of value, however. Consider the question of why interest disappeared from psychological discourse. A clue can be found in an article by William James published in 1884. He proposed to study only emotions with a distinct bodily expression, which he called standard emotions. He mentioned interest as an example of an emotion without such an expression but clearly still conceived of interest as an emotion. James has had a strong influence on the subsequent study of emotion, and it seems that, over the years, interest was demoted from being a nonstandard emotion, in James's terms, to not being an emotion at all.

—Tomkins revived interest as a part of emotion psychology by pointing to a possible and distinct type of bodily expression, in particular, facial expression. Silvia reviews work that supports that notion. Facial expression (Reeve, 1993) and vocal tone are correlated with interest, and interest can be distinguished from other emotions on the basis of such bodily cues. Subjectively, it is clearly distinguished from enjoyment, as Silvia shows. In addition, interest has been implicated, in Csikszentmihalyi's (1992) work on flow, as a state of mind of intense concentration on a certain task, a pleasant feeling of being in the task and nowhere else, a sense that the rest of the world is closed out for the moment.

—Silvia concludes that there is evidence for conceiving of interest as an emotion, and I agree, but probably not all emotion theorists are persuaded. Some standard texts on emotion psychology, such as the one by Oatley and Jenkins (1996), do not list the word *interest* in their index. The American Psychological Association journal *Emotion* published only four articles (and three commentaries) dealing with interest as an emotion in its first five volumes. Judging from these few articles, however, one gets the impression that some emotion researchers are now open to the possibility that interest is an emotion.

☞ Conceiving of interest as an emotion has far-reaching implications. It gives interest a central role in motivating certain kinds of behavior (exploration, learning for its own sake) that can be assumed to have important functional value for the individual. This, I believe, is the way interest was always conceived in folk psychology. One can only regret that researchers in psychology have been so reluctant to listen to their own phenomenology. No researcher worth his or her salt is not driven by interest; when interest dies, so do creativity and lust for life.

Causes of Interest

☞ What gives rise to interest? Berlyne suggested a set of “collative” variables that he conceived of as causing curiosity: novelty, complexity, uncertainty, and conflict. These dimensions are assumed to have a curvilinear relationship to interest: Something new and uncertain is interesting only if it constitutes a problem that can be solved. Too much uncertainty does not invite exploration and problem solving, just as too little uncertainty sets the stage for boredom. Berlyne's work on the collative dimensions was an important contribution to the field, whereas his arousal model has lost its attraction, along with other arousal approaches (Cupchik, 1988). Instead, appraisal is seen as a clue to understanding emotions (Scherer, 1997), including interest. Silvia develops the appraisal approach to interest in a lucid manner. When something is appraised—possibly very fast and subconsciously—as a problem, but a solvable problem, interest is aroused. People differ in interest, as they also differ in ability. What is a challenging problem to one person is too little of a challenge to another.

Wider Meanings of Interest

☞ Language being what it is, the meaning of the word *interest* is not exhausted by its definition as an emotion. The word *interest* has several meanings. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, *interest*—with the exclusion of economic denotations—is defined as “a feeling that accompanies or causes special attention to an object or class of objects,” “something that arouses such attention,” and “a quality in a thing arousing interest” (5a-c, Merriam-Webster OnLine, n.d.).

☞ Hence, it is important to distinguish the feeling from that which gives rise to it. The former meaning refers to interest as emotion. However, much research on interest is not explicitly concerned with interest as an emotion but deals with the objects of interest, how people value activities and call them interesting. Perhaps the best example is work on vocational interests, well reviewed by Silvia. According to Holland's (1973) RIASEC model, there are six basic types of vocational interests: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. This approach has roots in German psychology of the 1920s (Spranger & Pigors, 1928). A classification of interest with regard to contents, be it vocational or

otherwise, is a classification of things arousing interest and says something about structure but little or nothing about the dynamics of how interest develops, what it is, and what its consequences are.

☞ The connections between interest as emotion and interest as valuation constitute an exciting problem for future research. Silvia proposes an emotion-attribution theory of the development of interests that traces interest in activities to (a) having had the pleasant emotional experience of interest in connection with the activity and (b) construing the activity as the cause of the emotion. In this theory, people strive for activities because they expect them to give rise to a pleasant emotional experience, not because the activities are attractive per se. Silvia writes, "Interests are categories of emotional knowledge" (p. 147). He does not critically discuss this assertion, but he should. It is at odds with the phenomenology of interest. We do things because we like them, not because we expect that such action will give rise to a pleasant feeling of interest.

☞ Silvia does show that attribution of interest guides preferences and actions; misattribution is shown experimentally to lead a person astray. However, it seems unlikely that the emotion-attribution model could, in the long run, account for interest that does not have any other sustaining basis in the emotional dynamics of an individual. It is hard for an individual to know why he or she has certain interests; they are just there. It is just as hard for the researcher to explain interests, as Silvia's review of the literature shows.

Consequences of Interest

☞ Interest has important consequences. Should people follow their interest? This is a common idea, often voiced in commemoration speeches and possibly supported by success stories about people who did so and achieved success. However, success also presupposes talent, luck, and the right contacts. Strong tenacity in pursuing an interest may lead to failure if these factors are not present. The notion that one should follow one's true interest is akin to the idea of self-realization (Maslow, 1962; Sjöberg, 2006) and disregards the problem of talent. In addition, interest may be elastic—that is, it may develop once an activity is started and has led to some stimulating and well-handled challenges.

☞ Interest is a strong factor in time allocation; people spend time on what they are interested in, if they have a chance to do so. When they sampled everyday actions at random, Sjöberg and Magneberg (1990) found that people rated most actions as interesting, often highly so. People also process material more deeply when they are interested in it. A text is interesting, as Silvia points out, for much the same reason that other things are interesting: It contains some new and problematic contents but can be understood and assimilated with a moderate effort. (Texts that

require no effort at all are boring.) Students read interesting texts not only for the surface, memorizing facts and passing exams, but also to learn more permanently and relate what they learn to broader conceptual structures. The development of excellence in any field takes time, a lot of time. Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) have argued that it takes about 10 years of intense training to become a high-achieving expert. Nobody would spend that amount of time without a sustained and very high level of interest and positive feedback.

Conclusion

☞ The appraisal model of interest summarizes much of the work on the factors that give rise to interest in diverse fields. However, Silvia's theory of interest is abstract in the sense that it does not specify what a person will be interested in. The collative variables are probably necessary precursors of interest but are not sufficient. Why is someone interested in playing tennis, someone else in psychological research? Both fields offer challenges, but of very different kinds. Talent for a certain activity and rewards for successes are probably needed for interest to develop and be sustained. Is this enough, or are still other factors needed to understand interest and its development? Is interest largely a question of our talents and what opportunities we are, more or less at random, exposed to?

☞ I feel that something is missing in the psychological analysis of interest. Why, of all the thousands of alternatives, is Silvia (and I) interested in the psychology of interest? Silvia freely admits that he does not know (and neither do I). Let me take another example. My 10-year-old granddaughter is extremely interested in horses and riding, like so many girls of her age. Some of that interest possibly can be explained by collative variables and the activity of riding a horse, taking care of it, and so on, but there also seems to be a question of sheer fascination with horses per se, quite regardless of any activity having to do with horses. We may be hardwired to develop a lust for certain types of objects and activities. Genetic determination of part of the interest variance is a very real possibility (Ellis & Bonin, 2003).

☞ Silvia has done a superb job in reviewing several diverse research traditions and pointing out how they may be related. Clearly, psychological research on interest promises to be very interesting in the near future.

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