

## Exploring the Functions, Correlates, and Consequences of Interest and Curiosity

**Exploring the Psychology of Interest.** P. J. Silvia, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 263 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover).

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In fewer than 200 pages of text, Paul J. Silvia provides the reader with a compelling theoretical and empirical rationale for the importance of interest in the study of emotion, personality, motivation, education, careers, and vocations, and thus in nearly every area of human activity. Despite several books devoted to interest and curiosity (Berlyne, 1960; Dewey, 1913; Fowler, 1965; Keller, Schneider, & Henderson, 1994; Voss & Keller, 1983), this topic inexplicably eludes mainstream appeal in the social sciences. There are three basic reasons why Dr. Silvia's book should catalyze a critical mass of attention to the study of interest.

First, there is an ambitious review of theory and research, from Dewey's (1913) musings on the interrelations among interest, perceived competence, and learning to "in press" empirical studies on how interest can be understood in the context of emotion and appraisal theories. Prior to this book, most of this work has been segregated by terminology (e.g., personal interest, individual interest, situational interest, actualized interest, curiosity, intrinsic motivation, openness to experience) and discipline (e.g., the study of vocational interests in the field of counseling psychology remains relatively divorced from basic research on interest and curiosity). The coherent synthesis of such wide-ranging material over several decades is impressive and thought-provoking. However, this only scratches the surface of how this book contributes to the literature.

Second, in an attempt to address ongoing controversies and lingering questions, Dr. Silvia provides a substantial amount of evidence from contemporary research on emotion and appraisals to further a model on the structure of momentary states of interest and enduring interests. Several basic questions are addressed in detail. How should interest be categorized (e.g., emotion)? What makes objects and events interesting? Is interest a unitary or multidimensional construct? Are feelings of interest negative (motivating its own reduction) or positive (rewarding in itself)? How does interest dif-

fer from other positive states such as enjoyment and happiness? What are the best methods to measure interest? How does interest affect the way material is learned inside and outside of educational settings? How do longer term interests develop? What is the role of other psychological factors such as self-efficacy and autonomy on the presence of interest and interests? To what degree does the interestingness of stimuli have a nonlinear relationship with outcomes such as exploratory behavior, learning, and psychological health? As can be expected for a book focusing on interest, novelty, complexity, and uncertainty, many of these questions have yet to be adequately addressed by social scientists. One of the strengths of this book is that the author offers a large number of promising ideas and directions for the interested researcher or educator.

Third, to complement the review of nearly a century of work on interest, the proposals, methods, and conclusions by authors are not accepted at face value. Rather, they are challenged and, in many cases, reinterpreted. For example, a body of work has suggested that interesting educational material has a nonlinear effect on learning, such that the inclusion of intriguing or seductive details about a topic interferes with the recall and learning of important information ("seductive details hypothesis"). Considering the impact of this hypothesis on how classes are taught and textbooks are designed, readers will appreciate the careful re-examination of existing methodology and evidence, alternative explanations that were not previously considered, and the integration of related data on how interesting material is processed at a more automatic and spontaneous level, thus broadening the availability of attention and vitality for ongoing tasks and challenges. After reading this section, the reader is likely to recognize the paucity of data available to evaluate the large number of testable, falsifiable hypotheses in dominant theoretical models. There is a pressing need for more refined methodologies and analytic approaches to draw reliable con-

clusions about the nature of interest and curiosity. The commitment to science and empirical approaches as an ongoing dynamic process resonates throughout the book. Dr. Silvia recognizes that the study of interest is an evolving topic of study, and this book can be considered a well-needed progress report.

There are few issues and controversies in the study of interest that are not explored. The basic scientist should appreciate an entire section examining the evidence focusing on states of interest and whether it is an emotional state, a separate section focusing on interest and related constructs as personality dimensions, and the interplay of state-trait approaches throughout the rest of the book. The applied scientist should appreciate an entire section devoted to the work on interest, learning, and education and a separate section focusing on the extensive and virtually isolated body of work on vocational and career interests. One might quibble about the relative absence of work on interest in other applied areas such as psychotherapy, but I would argue that the field of interest can be serviced by taking a step back to thoroughly examine what interest is, how it differs from related constructs, and the strengths and limitations of current assessment strategies before moving on to the next stage of work on how to facilitate curiosity and how it might foster a better understanding of psychological functioning and why people do the things they do.

This book is relevant to not only researchers and clinicians currently concentrating on the topics of interest, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation but anyone interested in emotion, personality, and motivation. Although scientists make up the primary audience for this book, the clear and coherent writing style transforms potentially complex topics into easily digestible material. Thus, this book can be read and appreciated by anyone with a minor background in psychology (including undergraduate college students, educators, and allied health professionals). Moreover, with the recent

surge of interest in the positive spectrum of psychological functioning ("positive psychology"), *Exploring the Psychology of Interest* offers insight into a psychological state, dispositional tendency, and set of activities that arguably reflect some of the most positive, engaging, and meaningful aspects of human nature. This book provides a convincing case for a more inclusionary status of interest in the study and treatment of human behavior.

Having obtained his Ph.D. in 2001, Dr. Silvia has already published over 40 articles and book chapters on topics including interest and curiosity, self-awareness, self-regulation, self-determination, art and aesthetics, social identity, and prison reform. He has an extensive program of research on the psychological processes that makes things interesting or boring.

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