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Self-efficacy and interest: Experimental studies of optimal incompetence

Paul J. Silvia

Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170, USA

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Abstract

How does self-efficacy affect interest? The interest-and-interests model assumes that factors that induce interest—novelty, complexity, conflict, and uncertainty—do so non-linearly. Self-efficacy should thus affect interest quadratically, because it reflects uncertainty about an activity's outcome. When self-efficacy is low, interest is low because the activity's outcome is certain. When self-efficacy is moderate, the person's success on the task seems likely, but not inevitable. But as self-efficacy becomes very high, success seems completely certain, and the task is thus uninteresting. Two experiments tested these predictions. Experiment 1 asked people to rate the interestingness of differentially difficult activities; Experiment 2 manipulated self-efficacy regarding a fuzzy dart game. In both experiments, interest was a quadratic function of self-efficacy. Implications for theories of vocational interest development and change are considered. © 2003 Elsevier Science (USA). All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Beliefs about personal agency are foundational to motivated activity (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy plays an important role in many theoretical issues, such as when people feel their lives are meaningful (Feldman & Snyder, 2000), how people cope with traumatic events (Snyder, 2000), and when people take responsibility for failure instead of blaming others (Duval & Silvia, 2001, 2002; Silvia & Duval, 2001).

E-mail address: P_silvia@uncg.edu.

Vocational interest research has long explored the conceptual possibilities of self-efficacy theory (Hackett & Betz, 1981). Indeed, self-efficacy appears to be one of the major variables in modern vocational psychology (Betz, 2000; Betz & Borgen, 2000).

Self-efficacy theory has impacted vocational psychology so much because agency beliefs seem to promote interest development. Quite a lot of research, both experimental and correlational, finds that self-efficacy increases interest and performance (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). These effects of self-efficacy are distinct from effects of abilities, personality variables, and outcome expectancies (Bandura, 1997; Donnay & Borgen, 1999). Apart from providing a foothold into understanding how interests develop—a historically obscure issue (Savickas, 1999)—this work has clarified why people often do not enact vocational interests (Betz, 1999) and explained some important gender and ethnic differences (Hackett & Betz, 1981).

2. Sources of interest

Why does self-efficacy increase interest? Intuition suggests that people should be interested in what they expect to do well; this seems reasonable. But intuition is not enough, and researchers have not been very specific about *why* self-efficacy should make something interesting (e.g., Bandura, 1997, pp. 218–223; Lent et al., 1994). Indeed, intuition also suggests that people have a lot of boring competencies. Adults can walk miles without stumbling, and can speak coherently for hours, but they probably find neither of these activities very interesting. Anyone with a VCR and a video card probably has high self-efficacy for movie renting, but this alone does not make all movies interesting. Activities probably cease to be interesting at very high levels of self-efficacy.

The interest-and-interests model (Silvia, 2001a, in press) suggests some reasons why self-efficacy would affect interest *quadratically*. This approach views interest as a basic emotion (Izard, 1977). As a basic emotion, interest must have properties characterizing all emotions (see Silvia, in press, chap. 2): facial expressions (Reeve, 1993), universality, subjective-experiential qualities, constructive functions across the life-span (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001), and appearance in early infancy (Langsdorf, Izard, Rayias, & Hembree, 1983). In this approach, then, interest is not simply liking or valuing something (cf. Evans, 1965; Lent et al., 1994), a disposition toward attention (White, 1967), a state of wanting or diffuse motivation (Ortony & Turner, 1990), or “liking and willful engagement in a cognitive activity” (Schraw & Lehman, 2001, p. 23). Interest is more specific, by being defined as a basic emotion, and more general, inasmuch as emotions have profound implications for human functioning across the life-span (Abe & Izard, 1999; Magai & McFadden, 1995).

Like all emotions, interest has innate inducers, the unlearned factors that amplify and attenuate an emotion’s intensity. An emotion’s set of innate inducers tends to be small and circumscribed—emotions, as evolved systems, could not have anticipated the modern human’s set of possibly emotional circumstances (Darwin, 1872/1998). Innate inducers thus tend to be abstract, general, and thematic (Lazarus, 1991; Tomkins, 1962), such as perceiving threat (fear), experiencing loss (sadness), or achieving

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