

THE NATURE OF THE INTEREST CONSTRUCT AND ITS UTILITY IN THE STUDY OF LEISURE BEHAVIOR

Ellen B. Drogin Rodgers, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Director, Center for Recreation and Tourism Research and Policy, George Mason University, 10900 University Boulevard, Manassas, VA 20110

Brenda P. Wiggins, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Center for Recreation and Tourism Research and Policy, George Mason University, 10900 University Boulevard, Manassas, VA 20110

Abstract: The intent of this paper is to initiate discussion regarding the nature of the interest construct. Interest influences "what people attend to, think about, discuss and learn more about" (Frick, 1992) and has been used pervasively in many disciplines as a means of explaining concepts as varied as career choice, motivation, enjoyment, learning and academic achievement, participation, attention, flow and importance. The interest construct, however, has not been clearly defined in the literature nor has a theoretical model yet been proposed. This synthesis of the disparate and multidisciplinary efforts involving interest moves us towards conceptualization and proposition of a theoretical framework that positions an expanded view of interest in the study of leisure behavior.

Introduction

Interest influences "what people attend to, think about, discuss and learn more about" (Frick, 1992). Pervasively used in many disciplines as a means of explaining concepts as varied as career choice, motivation, enjoyment, learning and academic achievement, participation, attention, flow and importance, Kilby (1994) notes that in its obviousness, the concept of "interest" has been taken for granted. In the literature, the interest construct has been approached from two perspectives: *individual* and *situational* (Hidi & Baird, 1986; Kim, 1999; Renninger, Hidi & Krapp, 1992; Shirey & Reynolds, 1988). *Individual interests*, which are specific to the individual predisposition, are relatively stable, but develop slowly. These interests stem from conceptualization of knowledge, beliefs and values (Chen, 2001). Frick (1992) equated individual interests with "interestedness", a feeling of interest that occurs prior to learning the outcome of an event and usually associated with an individual's disposition. For example, if a recreationist is motivated to participate in adventure/high-risk activities (e.g., rock climbing, scuba diving) for the inherent potential for arousal and novelty, they will likely be "interested" in an activity such as hang gliding. In contrast, *situational interest* elicited by stimulus characteristics or the environment are generated immediately and shared among individuals. Situational interest has been theoretically articulated as a multidimensional construct that derives from person-activity interaction (Chen, Darst & Pangarzi, 1999). It occurs when an activity provides a sense of novelty and

challenge, demands exploratory actions, high level of attention and generates feelings of instant enjoyment (Deci, 1992). Frick (1992) equated situational interest with "interestingness", a feeling of interest that occurs after the outcome of an event and is generated by certain stimuli. For example, having experienced the freedom and arousal from participating in hang gliding, the recreationist is now likely to find that activity "interesting" and will look for similar pursuits in the future.

Both individual and situational interests comprise appetitive, affective and cognitive components. The *appetitive* component of interest initiates, sustains and directs psychological or physical activities as well as internal impulses, drives or desires (Wolman, 1973). Appetitive interest is on either the conscious or subconscious level arousing attention, attracting curiosity, inviting exploration, investigating and manipulating stimuli (Reeve, 1989). The *affective* or feeling component of interest selects and influences perceptions about what we are exposed to (Izard, 1977). Feelings are a way to become acquainted with things, the starting point of cognition (James, 1890). *Cognitive* interest occurs as one evaluates the personal gains or benefits from the activity, wonders about being accepted or needed, thinks about what or who is enjoyable, and desires to learn more (Izard, 1977).

Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Interest

In order to fully investigate the potential for or role of interest in the study of leisure behavior, it is first necessary to examine references to the interest construct in various disciplines. In the field of *education*, interest expedites person-environment interactions by uniting subject, object and behavior into a vital relationship that satisfies needs, fulfills values, fosters self-development, enhances adaptations and substantiates identity (Savickas & Spokane, 1999). High interest has been associated with academic achievement. In the study of children, recall increases with effort and interest, and that interest influences effort (O'Sullivan, 1997). Feelings regarding previous behaviors and perceptions about skills interact to decrease or enhance interest, therefore influencing participation (Sansone, 1989). The experience of interest while participating in an activity can subsequently be an important proximal motivator even for activities that are mundane and performed for extrinsic reasons (Sansone, Wiebe & Morgan, 1999).

In the *social psychology* literature, interest is viewed as a precursor to motives and actions, and is determined by unexpectedness and personal relatedness (Schank, 1979). It is a monotonic function of collative variables such as novelty, complexity, surprise and ambiguity (Berlyne, 1974). Interest contributes to intrinsic motivation by arousing the initiation and direction of attention and exploratory behavior (Reeve, 1989). In tandem with ability level and personality dispositions, it determines the probability of success in a particular task domain. In the flow state, the person is completely motivated by his or her personal interest and becomes inseparable from the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). If a situation is highly familiar

or highly unfamiliar or if a situation is easily expected or not expected at all, the interestingness decreases (Sadovski, Goetz & Fritz, 1993). Just as social factors can influence ones' interest in performing an activity both immediately and in the future, an apparent lack of interest in a leisure pursuit, may not be a lack of interest, but a resignation to interpersonal constraints, both intrinsic and extrinsic (Searle & Jackson, 1985).

Interest Assessments: Tools and Inventories

Assessment of interest developed as an outgrowth of education and industry efforts to attain ability information for decision-making. Early interest assessment involved asking individuals to indicate their feelings toward an activity. This hypothetical estimation was not always effective, so individuals were also encouraged to participate in a designated activity in order to determine their interest. To save time and cost, rating scales were developed to more systematically assess interest.

Use of these scales was based on the assumption that people with similar interests can be clustered together and at the same time be differentiated from groups with dissimilar interests. Table 1 lists a sample of the varied educational/vocational tools and leisure interest inventories that have been used.

Future Research

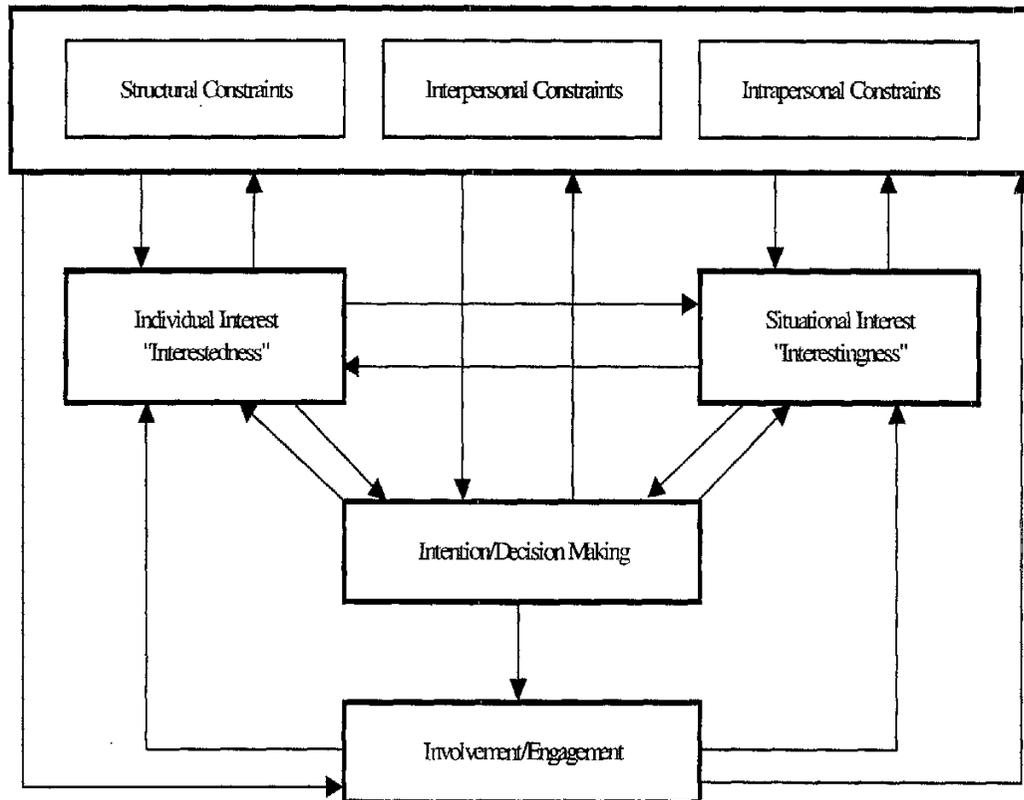
Although early research was a theoretical, literally forming a scale for every occupation, there have been numerous

efforts in education and psychology to derive a general model of interest dimensions. Holland (1966), based on preliminary work in vocational studies, proposed a structure of interest dimensions for better understanding how people approach and operate within learning and work environments. During the past several decades, leisure researchers have explored the phenomenon of engagement or participation in activities. Regardless of the variables proposed to explain or predict participation, "interest" of the respondent is often the primary rationale given for significance or lack of significance in findings. Other than operationalization as a list of activities in which an individual would like to participate or a single-item question inquiring as to the respondents "interest" in an activity, the concept has not been clearly defined in the literature, nor has a model of interest been proposed. Based on an extensive review of research focusing on the interest construct and its interrelationship with concepts key to defining leisure behavior, the following model was developed (Figure 1). Future efforts should focus on testing this theoretical framework that positions an expanded view of interest in the study of leisure behavior.

Table 1 Varied educational/vocational tools and leisure interest inventories

<i>Educational/Vocational Tools</i>	
Kuder Personal Preference Record	(Kuder, 1939)
Holland's Vocational Preference Inventory	(Holland, 1958)
Kuder Occupational Interest Survey	(Kuder, 1966)
Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory	(Campbell & Hansen, 1981)
<i>Leisure Interest Inventories</i>	
Leisure/Work Interest Inventory	(Frisbie, 1984)
Fain's Pictorial Leisure Interest Inventory	(Kanters & Anderson, 1988)
Leisure Interest Scale	(Ragheb & Beard, 1992)
Leisure Activities Inventory for Adolescents	(Hong, Milgram, & Whiston, 1993)
Multidimensional Interest Scale	(Wiggins, 1994)
Recreation and Leisure Inventory	(Glausier, Whorton, & Morgan, 1996)
Game Interest Inventory for Older Adults	(Hopkes, Hally, & Sewell, 2000)

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of the Interest Construct within the Context of Leisure Behavior



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