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'Aha' Effect: New Hypothesis Seeks to Explain the Pleasures of Insight

The sudden appearance of a solution through insight -- the famous 'aha' effect -- is a peculiar phenomenal experience that people have when they solve a problem.

Although many anecdotes exist about how discoveries were made by sudden insights, little is known about its nature. Based on recent research, Sascha Topolinski from the University of Würzburg, Germany, and Rolf Reber from the University of Bergen, Norway, put forward a new hypothesis that integrates the known features of insight experiences into a unitary framework.

The literature on insight lists four main characteristics of this experience:

Suddenness: The experience is surprising and immediate;

Ease: Compared to the obstacles experienced before, the task solution proceeds smoothly and easily;

Positive affect: Insights yield positive affective experience;

The feeling of being right: After an insight, problem solvers judge the solution as being true and have confidence in this judgment, even before assessing its rightness.

Although the phenomenology of insight is well-known, no theory has combined the four characteristics. The authors combined recent research findings about subtle influences in judgmental tasks to combine the four characteristics. A recent study suggests that immediacy of an experience gives rise to feelings of rightness. Moreover, when the processing of information is fluent, people feel positive affect and think that the information is true, especially when the felt ease of processing comes as a surprise.

These findings combined yield the hypothesis that insight is an experience during or subsequent to problem solving attempts in which problem-related content comes to mind with sudden ease and provides a feeling of pleasure, the belief that the solution is true, and confidence in this belief.

Sascha Topolinski, Rolf Reber. Gaining Insight Into the 'Aha' Experience. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2010; DOI: 10.1177/0963721410388803