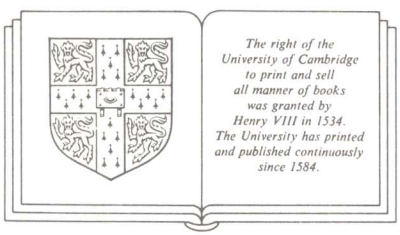
Optimal experience

Psychological studies of flow in consciousness

Edited by
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
and
Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi



Cambridge University Press

Cambridge
New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1988

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Optimal experience.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Consciousness. 2. Consciousness – Cross-cultural studies.I. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly.
II. Csikszentmihalyi, Isabella Selega. [DNLM:
1. Consciousness. 2. Cross-Cultural Comparison.
BF 311 062]
BF311.063 1988 153 87–24289

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Optimal experience : studies of flow in consciousness.

1. Consciousness – Religious aspects
2. Psychology and religion
I. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly
II. Csikszentmihalyi, Isabella Selega
291.2'2 BL53

ISBN 0 521 34288 0

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For Mark and Christopher

Acknowledgments

In the years since we first started studying flow so many people have helped with ideas, moral support, and financial funding, that it is not humanly possible to give each of them the credit due. Nevertheless, it is a pleasure to remember here those persons who have left a particular mark on the development of the research reported in this volume. No one will ever know how important their encouragement and support have been in furthering these difficult investigations. This token of thanks should not, however, place any responsibility on their shoulders for any weaknesses in our work.

The first studies on the flow experience were funded by the Applied Research Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health. The more recent developments have been supported by the Spencer Foundation, whose Board has exercised over the years a very beneficial influence on innovative research in the behavioral sciences. We should like to thank personally the former president, Thomas James, and the executive director, Marion Faldet, for their patience and understanding.

At the University of Chicago the friendship and encouragement of Bernice Neugarten and Jacob W. Getzels have always been very dear to us. Norman Bradburn, Robert Butler, Donald Fiske, John MacAloon, and Salvatore Maddi all have done work in areas related to this volume, and with their scholarship they have helped the development of our ideas. Donald Levine and Edward Laumann have provided moral support with their interest on numerous occasions.

Of scholars at other universities Donald Campbell of Lehigh has been a model of how psychologists could apply their thoughts rigorously to areas outside their immediate field. Jerome Singer of Yale and M. Brewster Smith of Santa Cruz have been attentive and judicious critics of our work. With Howard Gardner of Harvard and David Feldman of Tufts we have had many pleasant and stimulating exchanges through the

years. Jean Hamilton, now in private medical practice in Washington, D.C., was an early friend and collaborator who has continued to work in this area. Of the many colleagues whose influence is evident in this volume we should like to single out Richard deCharms of Washington University in St. Louis; Edward Deci and Michael Ryan of Rochester; Edward Diener, Jack Kelly, and Douglas Kleiber at the University of Illinois, Urbana; Mark Lepper of Stanford; and Brian Sutton-Smith of the University of Pennsylvania. Three journal editors have been particularly helpful in disseminating the research on flow: Thomas Greening of *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology;* Ladd Wheeler of the *Review of Personality and Social Psychology,* and John Broughton of *New Ideas in Psychology*. The interest and encouragement of Ralph Burhoe, founder of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, and of Philip Hefner, its current president, have also been important. Of those who have presented the ideas contained in this volume to a wider public we should mention Daniel Goleman, now with *The New York Times*, Robert Cross of the *Chicago Tribune*, John McCormick of *Newsweek*, and Michael Dibb, who produced documentaries for the BBC.

Among colleagues abroad we wish to acknowledge Professors Hans Aebli at the University of Berne in Switzerland; Michael Argyle at Oxford University, England; Hermann Brandstetter at the University of Linz, Austria; James Crook, of Bristol University, England; Marten De Vries at Limburgh University in Maastricht, Holland; Heinz Heckhausen of the Max-Planck Institute in Munich, Germany; Hiroaki Imamura at Chiba University, Japan; Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann at the University of Mainz, Germany; Ivàn Vitànyi at the Center for Research in Culture in Budapest, Hungary; and in Canada Roger Mannell and Jiri Zuzanėk at Waterloo University; Len Wankel at the University of Alberta; and Gerald Kenyon at the University of Lethbridge.

Of those who have at one time or another contributed to the research included in this volume we wish to thank Ronald Graef, who was among the first collaborators in the study of flow; Edward Donner, Tom Figurski, Susan Gianinno, Marlin Hoover, Suzanne Prescott, Barbara Rubinstein, and Carolyn Schneider.

Finally we should like to thank Susan Milmoe of Cambridge University Press for her helpful and astute editorial leadership.

Contributors

Maria T. Allison, Department of Leisure Studies, Arizona State University.

Massimo Carli, Institute of Psychology, University of Milan Medical School, Milan, Italy.

Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi, Editor and Writer, Chicago.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Committee on Human Development, Department of Behavioral Sciences, University of Chicago.

Margaret Carlisle Duncan, Department of Leisure Studies, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Antonella Delle Fave, Institute of Psychology, University of Milan Medical School, Milan, Italy.

Seongyeul Han, Department of Psychology, University of Seoul, Korea.

Reed Larson, Department of Child Development, University of Illinois, Urbana.

Judith LeFevre, Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago.

Richard D. Logan, Department of Human Development, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay.

Jim Macbeth, School of Social Sciences, Murdoch University, Western Australia.

Fausto Massimini, Institute of Psychology, University of Milan Medical School, Milan, Italy.

Richard G. Mitchell, Jr., Department of Sociology, Oregon State University.

Jeanne Nakamura, Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago.

Kevin Rathunde, Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago.

Ikuya Sato, Research Institute for Japanese Culture, Tohoku University, Sandai, Japan.

Anne J. Wells, School of Nursing, University of Illinois, Chicago.

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1. Introduction

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI

Some ten years ago the first publications reporting studies of what we have called the "flow experience" appeared in print, beginning with an article in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and then the book *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 1975b). In the relatively short span of time since those unheralded beginnings, scholars in a variety of disciplines have found the concept of an optimal state of experience theoretically useful. A great amount of research has accumulated during the decade, and some of the results are now being applied in educational, clinical, and commercial settings. *Flow* has become a technical term in the field of intrinsic motivation. This introduction briefly reviews the events related to the development of this concept, and the rest of the volume presents some of the most representative and important contributions to the study of the flow experience during these crucial initial years.

The prehistory of the flow concept: before 1975

I was led to investigate the range of experiences that eventually became known as *flow* by certain observations I had made in the course of my doctoral research with a group of male artists (Csikszentmihalyi 1965; Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi 1976). The artists I studied spent hour after hour each day painting or sculpting with great concentration. They obviously enjoyed their work immensely, and thought it was the most important thing in the world. Yet it was quite typical for an artist to lose all interest in the painting he had spent so much time and effort working on as soon as it was finished. As long as he was at work on a canvas, the artist was completely immersed in the painting. It filled his thoughts for twenty-four hours a day. Yet as soon as the paint was dry, he usually

stacked the canvas in a distant corner of the studio against a wall and promptly forgot it.

Few artists expected any of their paintings to make them rich or famous. Why, then, did they work so hard at the easel – as hard as any executive hoping for a raise or a promotion? None of the extrinsic rewards that usually motivate behavior seemed to be present. Money and recognition appeared to play a minimal part. The object itself – the finished work of art – held few attractions once it was finished. So what accounted for the deep fascination that painting had for the artists?

The deterministic metaphysics underlying modern science suggested that there must be an answer (Popper 1965, p. 61). Regularities in human behavior don't just happen by chance. They are either caused or they have reasons. In psychology, the most widely held causal explanation for why artists paint is some variant of the notion of "sublimation." They enjoy painting, according to this explanation, because it is the closest socially acceptable symbolic expression of the artists' true desires, which are repressed instinctual cravings. But if one observes artists at work for any length of time, the sublimation hypothesis wears thin fairly soon. There is just too much genuine excitement and involvement with the emerging forms and colors to explain it all in terms of a substitution for something else. And why does the artist typically keep seeking ever more complex challenges, why does he constantly perfect his skills if the whole point is to experience vicariously the simple forbidden pleasures of his sexual programming? Up to a certain point sublimation as a cause might be a useful proposition. A few of the artists seemed to have begun painting partly to resolve an Oedipal tangle, or even earlier repressions. But whatever the original cause might have been, it was obvious that the activity of painting produced its own autonomous positive rewards.

Nor were these rewards something that artists expected to achieve after the activity was completed. The usual reason for actions that are not driven by causes is the expectation of reaching a goal-state that acts as a reward for the action. But the reason for painting did not seem to be the usual desire to achieve external goals. That suggested that the reasons might be within the activity: that the rewards of painting came from painting itself.

In the mid-sixties, when these observations were being made, few psychologists were as yet interested in intrinsic motivation; the ruling paradigm was still exclusively focused on explaining behavior in terms of extrinsic rewards. One of the few exceptions was Abraham Maslow.

His distinction between *process* and *product* orientations in creative behavior, which led him to identify "peak experiences," was the conceptual framework closest to the phenomena I was trying to understand (Maslow 1965, 1968). He described people who behaved like the artists in my study: people who worked hard not in order to get conventional rewards, but because the work itself was rewarding. Maslow ascribed the motivation to a desire for "self-actualization," a need to discover one's potentialities and limitations through intense activity and experience.

Maslow's explanation was compelling, but it left many questions unanswered. For example, could any kind of process – or activity – give intrinsic rewards, or only a few chosen ones, like the making of art? Did all intrinsically rewarding experiences *feel* the same; were the intrinsic rewards from art the same as those one gets from sports, or from writing poetry? Did all people have the same propensity to be intrinsically motivated, or did one have to be born an artist to enjoy the making of art? Maslow's pioneering work, primarily idiographic and reflective in nature, did not explore very far the empirical implications of these ideas.

Still intrigued by the question of intrinsic motivation, I turned to the literature on play in the hope of finding an explanation. A substantial body of thought had been developing about the play of children (Piaget 1951; Sutton-Smith 1971) and of adults (Huizinga [1939] 1970; Caillois 1958; Sutton-Smith & Roberts 1963). Play is clearly intrinsically motivated. Whatever its evolutionary significance and adaptive value might be (Beach 1945; Bekoff 1972, 1978; Fagen 1981; Smith 1982), people play because it is enjoyable. My contribution to this literature in the late sixties was an article describing the historical changes in the way rock climbing has been practiced and experienced (Csikszentmihalyi 1969), and an embryonic model of the flow experience developed with H. Stith Bennett, who at that time was a student at Lake Forest College (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett 1971).

By the early seventies, research on intrinsic motivation was gathering momentum at a few universities. The theoretical justification for this movement can be traced in part to D. O. Hebb's (1955, 1966) "optimal arousal hypothesis" that was extensively studied by Daniel Berlyne and J. McV. Hunt, among others (Hunt 1965; Berlyne 1960, 1966; Day, Berlyne, & Hunt 1971). This hypothesis was a way to account for laboratory experiments showing that even rats did not work exclusively to get food or to avoid shocks, but were also motivated by novelty, curiosity, and competence "drives" (Harlow 1953; Butler & Alexander 1955; White

1959). If any new stimulus could start complex exploratory behavior on the part of a monkey or a rat, this meant that the days when a few basic drives could account for everything an animal did were over. Among the influential statements that have supported this position were the volume edited by Fiske and Maddi (1961), the theoretical article by Dember (1974), and the review by deCharms and Muir (1978).

The first generation of researchers to focus directly on intrinsic motivation included Richard deCharms (1968, 1976), who earlier had investigated the achievement motive with David McClelland. His review of the literature on social motivation almost a decade ago (deCharms & Muir 1978) helped put the concept of intrinsic motivation on the intellectual agenda of psychologists. In his research, deCharms found striking differences among schoolchildren in terms of whether they did or did not feel in control of their lives. He called the first type "origins," because they believed that what they did was what they wanted to do; and he called the second type "pawns," because they felt that they were just being pushed around by outside forces. An important characteristic of the "origins" was their intrinsic motivation: Since they felt they owned their behavior, they took it more seriously and enjoyed it regardless of outside recognition. Indeed, deCharms hypothesized that in contrast to what drive theories might predict, if people were rewarded for doing things they had initially chosen spontaneously, their intrinsic motivation to do them would decrease.

At the University of Rochester, Edward Deci tested deCharms's prediction (1971, 1972, 1975). He found that if people were given money for doing things they enjoyed, they lost interest in those things faster than when they were not rewarded. Deci agreed with deCharms that under such conditions people came to see their involvement in the activity as being instrumental, controlled by external forces rather than freely chosen. Recognition of the reality of intrinsic motivation led Deci and his colleagues by an inevitable logic to investigations of autonomy and self-determination (Deci & Ryan 1985).

Mark Lepper's team of researchers at Stanford University discovered intrinsic motivation at about the same time. They were influenced by the social psychology of Heider (1958) and Kelley (1967, 1973), which ascribed greater importance to causal attributions than earlier cognitive theories of motivation had, and by the self-perception theory of Bem (1967, 1972), which assigns a similar autonomous power to the self construct. Studying children engaged in play activities, Lepper's team replicated and refined the overjustification findings, specifying the