

Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology 2
Series Editor: Antonella Delle Fave

Antonella Delle Fave
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Marta Bassi

Psychological Selection and Optimal Experience Across Cultures

Social Empowerment through
Personal Growth

 Springer

Antonella Delle Fave · Fausto Massimini ·
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Psychological Selection and Optimal Experience Across Cultures

Volume 2

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Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology

Volume 2

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The aim of the *Cross Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology* book series is to spread a universal and culture-fair perspective on good life promotion. The series will advance a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural differences in well-being conceptualization. A deeper understanding can affect psychological theories, interventions and social policies in various domains, from health to education, from work to leisure. Books in the series will investigate such issues as enhanced mobility of people across nations, ethnic conflicts and the challenges faced by traditional communities due to the pervasive spreading of modernization trends. New instruments and models will be proposed to identify the crucial components of well-being in the process of acculturation. This series will also explore dimensions and components of happiness that are currently overlooked because happiness research is grounded in the Western tradition, and these dimensions do not belong to the Western cultural frame of mind and values.

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*We gratefully dedicate this book to
Dr. Krishna Rao
Sister Ignazia
Marida and Mario*

Introduction

Human history is replete with political and economic crises, environmental disasters, wars, injustice, and destruction. It is also characterized by outstanding endeavors such as impressive artistic works, technologies, acts of altruism, gratitude, and cooperation. These highly paradoxical facets are all results of mankind, a species which has evolved on the principles of biological and cultural selection in interaction with the surrounding environment.

The evolution of the brain, the emergence of the mind, and the social nature of man have contributed to the development of a third paradigm, psychological selection, which interacts with biological and cultural instructions in adapting man to his living environment. Psychological selection represents the process according to which individuals select and replicate in time information coming from their environment, both shaping their life trajectories and actively contributing to the cultural and biological trends of their species. This is the topic the present book is about: psychological selection and the active role of individuals and communities in molding their survival on earth. In developing this topic, we will resort to our lifelong commitment as psychologists to the understanding of the contradictions in human nature, trying—like all other human beings—to give sense to human actions and behaviors, and envisaging the ways in which individuals' potentials and resources can contribute to social empowerment and to the creation of a peaceful and thriving global community.

While this aim may sound like hubris, or at best utopia, it is currently being shared by a growing number of scientists in various disciplines who aim at providing a change in focus from understanding and mending the ills of human beings to comprehending and enhancing their virtues. The theoretical background we refer to is positive psychology. As illustrated in Chapter 1, positive psychology is a novel approach to studying human behavior which aims at catalyzing a change in focus from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities. A key interest is the analysis of happiness which has been broadly defined according to two philosophical traditions: hedonism and eudaimonism. The hedonic view equates happiness with pleasure, comfort, and enjoyment, whereas the eudaimonic view equates happiness with the human ability to pursue complex goals which are meaningful to the individual and society. Besides analyzing

the antecedents, correlates, and consequences that happiness entails for human well-being at the individual and community levels, recent trends in positive psychology call for the integration of the hedonic and eudaimonic views into a global theory of human well-being, and stress the need to adopt a cross-cultural perspective on happiness which would take into account a worldwide concept of a life worth living.

It is within the broad positive psychology perspective of eudaimonia that we contextualize the three selective paradigms we presented above. Chapter 2 illustrates the processes of selection and transmission of biological and cultural information. In particular, culture is described as an emergent inheritance system that ultimately predominates on biology in shaping and directing human behavior at both the individual and the social levels. However, culture and biology interact in complex ways that impact on the relationships among human societies. Material and symbolic artifacts represent extrasomatic cultural products which substantially mediate the relationship between individuals and their environment.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the analysis of the process of psychological selection, and the role of individuals as active agents, who create, select, and replicate in time biological and cultural information according to personal meanings, goals, and experiences which are only partially constrained by biological and cultural inheritance. Flow or optimal experience is the core of psychological selection. We owe to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi the thorough investigation of this state of consciousness back in the mid-1970s. Through the analysis of people's self-reports and descriptions of their quality of experience in various situations and contexts—for example, while performing complex and challenging tasks at work or during leisure time—he detected a particularly complex and positive state of consciousness characterized by deep involvement, absorption and enjoyment in challenging tasks in which individuals could invest matching levels of personal resources and skills.

Because of their intrinsic reward, activities associated with optimal experience tend to be cultivated in time and can lead to the lifelong construction of personal interests and goals, namely individuals' life themes. Flow can trigger the active investment of time and effort in the practice and cultivation of the associated activities, thus progressively leading to an increase in skills and competencies and to the search for higher challenges, in order to support the engagement, concentration, and involvement that characterize optimal experience in the long term.

Ever since Csikszentmihalyi's pioneering work, a great number of instruments and methodologies have been developed for the study of flow, which are presented in Chapter 4. The majority of them are based on individuals' self-reports of the content of their consciousness. Additionally, methods vary according to the level of control exerted on the flow construct: They include observation and interview techniques, psychological surveys, and experimental studies. In particular, we present some tools we have extensively applied in our research work: (a) Flow Questionnaire and Life Theme Questionnaire, which through open-ended and scaled questions allow for the specific analysis of flow, flow-associated situations, and the meaning of such experience in the psychic organization of the individual and in the construction of her life theme and (b) Experience Sampling Method (ESM), through which

individuals provide online repeated descriptions of daily situations and of their states of consciousness as daily life unfolds. By means of these instruments and methods, more than three decades of research have provided extensive information on the phenomenology of optimal experience.

An overview of the findings—gathered primarily with ESM—is shown in Chapter 5. Flow is characterized by a stable cognitive core around which affective and motivational variable fluctuate according to the kind of associated activities. In light of these findings, our research team suggested that flow may not be a monolithic experience, and that there could be a family of optimal experiences related to the characteristics of associated tasks. This chapter further delves into individual and cultural features that have been found to favor individuals' retrieval of optimal experience in daily life. These include personality traits, physical conditions, personal goals, autonomy, family context, and activity characteristics, such as challenge and structure. Moreover, this chapter presents a comparison of flow with similar constructs such as peak experience and involvement and an analysis of the relationship between flow and other positive-psychology constructs.

The analysis of the features of optimal experience extends to Chapter 6. One of the crucial aspects of flow is complete absorption and focus of attention on the ongoing task. This psychological characteristic, and its chief importance within the phenomenology of flow, led us to inquire about the analogy between optimal experience and the states of meditation that are triggered by the concentration of attention on one single object. Such states have been systematically explored within the several philosophical systems and wisdom traditions developed in ancient India, which provided amazingly deep investigations of human psychological functions and consciousness processes. Chapter 6 is thus devoted to the analysis of the shared and divergent components of optimal experience and meditation, and to the contextualization of their phenomenological analysis within cultural and epistemological dimensions.

Having presented the theoretical and methodological aspects of our research, we next turn to applications. This part of the book is primarily centered on the field studies we have conducted around the world in Western and non-Western cultures, but it also includes findings obtained by international research teams. Some areas of investigation—such as work, education, or leisure—have been extensively studied, whereas others—such as cross-cultural issues, relationships, spirituality, migration, health, and maladjustment—have been largely unexplored by international flow academics, and we thus report unique novel data.

Chapter 7 introduces this book section providing an overview of psychological selection across cultures. By drawing from our databank of more than 1,000 adult and adolescent participants gathered with Flow Questionnaire and Life Theme Questionnaire, the universality of optimal experience as well as its relevance to individual and cultural functioning is presented. In addition, the importance of flow-related activities in fostering personal growth and cultural empowerment is analyzed by focusing on crucial life domains such as productive activities, leisure, interactions, and human development. Some of the issues raised in this chapter are then extensively analyzed in the following sections.

Chapter 8 centers on work as a fundamental human activity on which the bio-cultural survival and reproduction of individuals and groups are based. Work represents a privileged area for retrieving optimal experiences, in spite of the great emphasis individuals place on leisure activities. We thus present the peculiarities of the work experience compared to leisure and highlight personal, organizational, as well as cultural factors associated with optimal experience at the workplace. Attention is also paid to the role that work plays in individuals' psychological selection and well-being, by funneling psychic and material resources into pursuing professional fulfillment.

Leisure is the topic of Chapter 9. Free time includes various activities such as playing sports, practicing hobbies, idling, volunteering, interacting, watching TV, and playing videogames. These activities vary in terms of their contribution to individuals' development and well-being. From a broad perspective, they can be divided into serious and casual leisure, based on the constancy and duration of individuals' engagement. Starting from these conceptualizations, this chapter primarily focuses on sports and hobbies and media use. It illustrates the quality of associated experience and their potential as flow opportunities, as well as the individual and cultural features associated with optimal experience in leisure. The risks of free time in terms of disengagement and deviant behavior are also presented.

Considering the importance of relationships throughout human life span, we have devoted Chapter 10 to relational issues. Biological as well as cultural pressures substantially contribute to shape the features and functions of human interaction patterns within families, communities, and broader societies. Attention is paid to the role of relationships in fostering optimal experiences and in directing the process of psychological selection. Moving from core theoretical assumptions concerning the developmental implications of relationships in both individualistic and collectivistic countries, we present cross-cultural findings from family studies, focusing on parent–children interactions, sibling relations, friendship, as well as the opposite condition of solitude.

Chapter 11 explores education as the primary means of cultural transmission. A variety of educational systems and pedagogic strategies have been created in order to deal with this challenge across cultures. By promoting the association of their instructions with individuals' psychological selection, cultures can successfully survive in the long term, and at the same time support individuals' development and well-being. Given the importance of learning for both individuals and societies, flow researchers have devoted much attention to its investigation. In this chapter, we sum up major findings related to the quality of experience during formal learning activities across cultures. We identify the activities associated with optimal experience, the contextual and individual factors favoring flow in education, and we outline the short-term and long-term consequences of flow in learning. In particular, we stress the active role of the individual in perpetrating cultural information and the importance of an educational system allowing for the integration of instructions from different cultures thus sustaining plurality, complexity, and differentiation in a global society.

In Chapter 12 we investigate the role of religious practice in promoting optimal experience, as well as in shaping the process of psychological selection. Data obtained from participants belonging to different cultures and religious traditions are discussed. More specifically, we illustrate the occurrence of optimal experience during religious practice, its psychological features, and the relevance of religion among past life influences, present challenges, and future goals. Even though findings reveal that religion is not a relevant opportunity for optimal experience in daily life, they also highlight its importance in facing stressful situations and in providing individual and collective meanings and values.

The last three chapters broadly deal with adjustment and health. Chapter 13 tackles the process of migration which characterizes our times more than any other periods in history. Globalization poses a number of challenges: These range from enhanced mobility of people across nations to ethnic conflicts and to the disruption of traditional civilizations due to the dominance of the Western mono-cultural model. This phenomenon calls for the analysis of the cultural representations of happiness and well-being and of the relations between individuals and their cultural environment. Our studies on immigrants and ethnic minorities are presented in this chapter. Results show that the occurrence of optimal experiences and the features of the associated activities, as well as perceived current challenges and future goals, are primarily connected with the life opportunities offered by the hosting country, along with participants' cultural distance and length of stay. This information can be useful in designing programs to support the psychological well-being and socio-cultural adjustment of immigrants and minority members.

In Chapter 14 the relationship between psychophysical health and optimal experience is presented through the analysis of findings coming from individuals with motor and sensory disabilities, participants with eating disorders, women who underwent breast cancer surgery, and people with mental illness. Disease is not necessarily synonymous with suffering and languishing; occasions for personal growth and meaning finding can also be retrieved when physical conditions are suboptimal, or when accidents and traumas hit individuals' lives. In these occasions, people can resort to crucial personal resources, social support, and cultural and environmental factors that can promote well-being and can favor the construction of a life worth living.

Concerning people facing severe psychosocial problems and exposed to conditions of hardship and marginalization, little research has been conducted on their opportunities for optimal experience. Do they enjoy flow experiences during their daily life, and in which domains? How do their problematic conditions affect their psychological selection pattern and their potential for development, goal setting and pursuit? Chapter 15 investigates these issues in two specific categories of people living under difficult circumstances: children and adolescents exposed to neglect, abuse, and street life in different countries and drug addicts. Findings highlight a crucial aspect of psychosocial maladjustment: Opportunities for positive feelings and elation are available in daily life, but they do not provide authentic and complex flow experiences. This issue has to be taken into account in designing intervention

and treatment programs, in order to make them both appealing to users and effective in their rehabilitation aims.

Even though this book certainly does not comprise all the rich knowledge researchers have gathered over the years on such complex an issue as psychological selection, we hope that the readers may find in it useful information on the advancements in this scientific domain, may encounter suggestions on practical issues aiming to improve individuals' and communities' well-being, and may be spurred to take on the challenge of pursuing the investigation of optimal experience and positive human growth.

This book is the fruit of our personal commitment to research in this field. However, we would not have been able to write it without the precious help of all those people who have supported us in this endeavor. First and foremost, we thank Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who has inspired our work ever since our first meeting back in the mid-1970s, at a time in which mainstream research hardly recognized subjective experience as a legitimate topic in scientific psychology. His incredible insight into the phenomenology of optimal experience and his broad-minded vision of human nature have set a cornerstone in our research and have paved the way for a fruitful collaboration and a lifelong friendship. We would also like to thank all those students and colleagues who enthusiastically joined our research group over the years and bravely helped us in collecting the largest extant cross-cultural database on optimal experience. Last but not least, we thank all the participants in our studies who shared with us the beauties in their lives, and in so doing gave meaning to ours.

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