



Going with the Flow: Remembering Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1934-2021)

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Abstract: In October 2021, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi died aged 87. Among Positive Psychology students, scholars and practitioners, he will forever be remembered as one of the founders of the discipline. His legacy as a researcher includes the development of the concept of Flow, a “state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” and that is so enjoyable that they do it “for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihályi, 2002, p. 4). Flow’s applications range from school and education settings to workplaces, the arts, sports and beyond, and are continuously expanded by researchers. This makes flow an essential concept for any PP scholar and practitioner. His work was strongly influenced by his childhood experiences of World War II. This small article looks at the big life of a distinguished researcher whose legacy will continue to inspire generations of PP scholars and practitioners.

المخلص: في أكتوبر 2021 ، توفي (ميهالي تشيكيزينتميهالي) عن عمر يناهز 87 عامًا. وهو أحد الطلاب والعلماء الممارسين لعلم النفس الإيجابي ، سيظل ذكره إلى الأبد كأحد مؤسسي هذا التخصص. يتضمن إرثه كباحث بتطوير مفهوم التدفق ، وهي "حالة يشارك فيها الأشخاص إلى حد كبير في نشاط (مستوى الاستغراق المطلق) لا يبدو أن أي شيء آخر مهم" وهذا ممتع للغاية لدرجة أنهم يفعلون ذلك "لمجرد القيام بذلك" (Csikszentmihályi ، 2002 ، ص 4). تتراوح تطبيقات التدفق من المدرسة وإعدادات التعليم إلى أماكن العمل والفنون والرياضة وغير ذلك ، ويتم توسيعها باستمرار من قبل الباحثين. هذا يجعل التدفق مفهومًا أساسيًا لأي باحث وممارس لعلم النفس الإيجابي. كما تأثر عمله بشدة بتجارب طفولته في الحرب العالمية الثانية. تناولت هذه المقالة الصغيرة الحياة العظيمة للباحث المتميز الذي سيستمر إرثه في إلهام أجيال من الباحثين والممارسين في مجال علم النفس الإيجابي.

Keywords: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi; flow; positive psychology

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It is nigh impossible to study Positive Psychology (PP) without encountering the name Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in one of the very first lectures. His name – pronounced Chick-SENT-Me-High – is inextricably linked with the foundation of the discipline through the seminal article he co-authored with Martin Seligman that put PP on the map of psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Long before that, however, Csikszentmihalyi was already well known for his research into the concept of Flow, which he updated and summarised in another essential reading for PP scholars, the book *Flow: The classic work on how to achieve happiness* (2002). In October 2021,



Csikszentmihalyi died at his home in California, USA, aged 87, leaving the world of PP with a vibrant legacy that keeps inspiring.

Finding Flow

The expression “going with the flow” is common use. Yet, it was Csikszentmihalyi who over decades studied and captured the essence of this “flow” in a scientific manner. He described flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” and is so enjoyable that they do it “for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihályi, 2002, p. 4). Flow has become an integral part of the “E” in another PP stalwart: the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). It proposes five paths that, in combination, may lead to a life of authentic happiness and wellbeing, including “E” for engagement.

Flow is a subjective experience where a challenge is just high enough to stretch our skills and abilities yet is still enjoyable. Thus, it covers that middle ground between boredom and overwhelm. Characteristics of flow include: intense focus, creativity losing oneself in the activity and losing the sense of time (Nakamura & Csikszentmihályi, 2009). For the person experiencing this state it may feel like play, but they have a sense of total control over what they are doing – things just flow. Over several decades of research, Csikszentmihalyi created a wealth of publications that has continuously been expanded and built on by other scholars. Flow’s applications range from school and education settings to workplaces, the arts, sports and beyond. His books are international bestsellers.

The Origins

The origins of Csikszentmihalyi’s development of the flow concept and its link to PP are closely connected with the man’s personal roots (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As son of a Hungarian diplomat, he was in Budapest towards the end of World War II when the Russians were entering the country and shelling the city. I remember listening to Csikszentmihalyi’s keynote speech at the 9th European Conference on Positive Psychology in 2018 in Budapest, struck by the poignancy of his recollection of fleeing the city more than 70 years ago on the last train out before the Russians blew up the bridge over the Danube. His early life experiences would strongly influence his work in adult life.

In 1956, Csikszentmihalyi moved to the US to study psychology and received his PhD from the University of Chicago in 1965. Years later, he would become the university’s head of department of psychology. In his impressive career, he also served as Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Management at Claremont Graduate University and founded the Quality of Life Research Center, dedicated to PP and the study of human strengths like optimism.

In his writing, he linked the need for a PP to his observations from World War II where some people “were reduced to empty shells” while others “kept their integrity”, giving hope to those around them (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6): “This experience set me thinking: What sources of strength were these people drawing on?” Today, theories, concepts and models like character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), resilience (e.g., Ungar, 2008), hope (Rand & Cheavens, 2009) and many more from the field of PP continue to strive to provide answers to this very same question posed by Csikszentmihalyi in 2000.



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