

BOOK REVIEW

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow. The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. Basic Books, 1997, 181 pp., USD 20.00. (Also available as paperback, 1998, 144 pp., USD 12.00)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has a difficult name, but a simple message. For three decades he has argued that the good life is lead by persons who find, in their daily lives, a proper balance between skills and challenges. *Finding Flow* repeats this formula as an integrated blend of old-age wisdom and current research findings. Thus, the only way to take over the ownership of life, is by learning to direct energy and to control attention, Csikszentmihalyi says in this book that is partly a psychological study and partly a self-help book.

Csikszentmihalyi is the author of a number of best-selling books, most of which deal with the concept of flow in one way or another. For those acquainted with his previous writings, the main ideas and writing style in *Finding Flow* will look largely familiar, but some new ideas and data will certainly be found in the text as well. The author is an eloquent writer and from the point of articulation, the book is a pleasure to read. All the nine chapters converge in the question of; “What is a good life?”, and Csikszentmihalyi’s answer is grounded in a collection of data that have lasted for more than 30 years, containing several thousand pages from about twenty-three hundred respondents.

Chapter 1 introduces the structure of everyday life, which is basically the premise upon which the book is written. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the content of experience in more detail, with well-known concepts like psychic entropy and the challenge-skill ratio (CSR). The CSR, accompanied perhaps by the Experience Sampling Method, is the backbone of Csikszentmihalyi career as an academic, and the flow model based upon it has become tremendously popular. Although overly simplistic, the model is beyond doubt helpful in bridging the gap between scientific approaches and folk theories related to happiness.

Chapters 4 addresses the paradox of work. It turns out that people quite often wish they were doing something else while at work. However, some of the most intense and satisfying moments are reported during working hours, and this is because we have more occasions for flow on the job. Work is much more like a game than most other things



we do during the day, says Csikszentmihalyi. Work tends to have the structure of other intrinsically rewarding activities that provide flow.

The risk of leisure, on the other hand, is that free time is more difficult to enjoy than work, states chapter 5. The author believes that the average person is ill equipped to be idle. Typical relaxation activities, such as gossiping or watching TV, rarely contribute to a positive quality of experience. However, on this point Csikszentmihalyi may forget the importance of activity variation and the need to rest. Actually, a day filled with challenging activities from 8 A.M. to 11 P.M. seems really breathless and exhausting to this reviewer, and the prescription of struggling your way with challenging activities every minute of the day may not be the proper way of living for all of us.

Chapters 6 and 7 reflect generally upon happiness, family life and society. By means of detailed descriptions of daily lives, these chapters also contain numerous examples illustrating how our ordinary lives may become more stimulating and challenging if we concentrate on the process of being active.

In chapter 8, the autotelic personality (i.e., a tendency for doing things for their own sake, rather than in order to achieve some later external goal) is introduced and their typical profiles in terms of subjective experiences are delineated. The chapter reveals how an autotelic attitude helps people (teenagers in this case) to be more concentrated, feel more enjoyment and hold a higher self-esteem. Interestingly, no difference was found between autotelic personalities and non autotelic personalities in terms of happiness. Teenagers whose flow increased over a 2 year study period did not report being happier than the ones for which flow decreased. These and similar results presented elsewhere in the book may indicate an important discrepancy between the (restricted) phenomenon of flow and the more general idea of happiness and a good life. This disparity is not fully acknowledged by Csikszentmihalyi, who rather explains the difference by questioning the validity of the instruments used to gather information about overall happiness.

Finally, chapter 9 dwells on the love of fate (inspired by Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati*) and on the importance of maintaining a productive attitude toward one's choices. "Not merely bear what is necessary, but love it", Nietzsche said. In closing the book Csikszentmihalyi tries to convince us that the quality of our lives will be much improved if we learn to love what we have to do.

The complete theory behind *Finding Flow* is more complex than the simple relationship between challenge and skill. Nevertheless, flow is operationalized by means of the challenge-skills-ratio. The obvious weaknesses of such simplification are not properly considered in the book. The apparent discrepancy between the theoretical notion of flow and the data on flow, needs to be addressed more clearly by the author. What Csikszentmihalyi describes and discusses as flow is some exceptional moments of intense living against a dull background. What is measured by the CSR is some vague and poorly validated relation between self reported skills and challenges. The serious gap between theory and data is confusing.

The lack of an articulated difference between flow, as a limited period of intense experience, and overall life satisfaction and happiness is a second shortcoming of the book. In subjective well-being research an important distinction is made between cognitive evaluations and affective experience. Similarly, the separate meanings of instant experiences, remembered experiences and overall judgements about the life-as-a-whole are normally considered to be very important for the scientific understanding of a good life. None of these challenging concepts are seriously considered by Csikszentmihalyi.

A third muddle in the book relates to the inconsistent use of terminology. Sometimes flow is regarded as analogous to autotelic activities, sometimes it is not. Sometimes one gets the impression that flow is synonymous to happiness, in other parts the two terms are rather divergent. Hence, as a scientific text the book suffers from sloppy terminology.

As a popular text, on the other hand, the book eloquently argues on the benefits of living fully in the here and now. Such a life style requires a particular psychological structure, basically achieved through a greater attention-control. Csikszentmihalyi clearly presents his technical research in layman's terms without leaving out too many details. Although the lessons taught in the book may appear simple on the surface, they will upon deeper consideration probably be appealing to personal reflections on, and experiences of, enjoyment, life-changes and human behavior in general.

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