

# ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЕ, МЕТОДОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ И ДИСКУССИОННЫЕ ВОПРОСЫ СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ПСИХОЛОГИИ

## FLOW AND OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE: METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONALIZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING A POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY CONCEPT. PART 2

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This article represents the second part of a two part series of articles focusing upon one core positive psychology concept — the peak experience termed flow developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi — as a test case for examining some of the issues involved when positive psychology is internationalized and made indigenous. In particular, methodological, measurement, and theoretical issues regarding flow research will be discussed. Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approaches to flow, including interviews, surveys, and the experience sampling method among others will be described. Evidence is examined from a range of existing research projects on flow from around the globe, raising questions concerning the positive psychology enterprise, including the value of psychological assessment tools and the debate over cross-cultural universals/comparisons. Rather than viewing qualitative and quantitative approaches (or anthropological and psychological perspectives) as rival factions, this project seeks to develop constructive dialogue that acknowledges both strengths and limitations of each approach to facilitate engagement with the topics of mixed methods and human strengths, subjects often neglected in cross-cultural research. The first part of the article series examined methodological implications of this positive psychology concept, and this second part of the article series focuses upon the cross-cultural implications.

**Key words:** flow, optimal experience, culture, internationalizing, positive psychology, methods

The first article in this two part article series focused upon flow, a psychological concept developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi at the University of Chicago [2]. Flow is conceptually related to intrinsic motivation. Though that article described the concept in detail, in brief here, flow may be defined as follows: a “state of optimal experience that people report when they are intensely involved in doing something that is fun to do” [3. P. 381). That article also contextualized flow in terms of the history of the positive psychology movement which began in the late 1990s, and which focuses upon the careful

examination of human strengths and virtues [29]. In particular the use of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods as well as other innovative methodological strategies (including experience sample and neuroscientific approaches) was discussed in relation to the use of methods more broadly in positive psychology, and in psychology in general. This article, the second in the two part series, extends the discussion of flow to consider its implications for cross-cultural and international research in positive psychology, and in psychology more broadly.

**Flow Lessons: Culture.** In addition to its implications for methods, flow research has numerous implications for issues in psychology related to culture, such as the issue of cross-cultural universals and comparisons. As noted earlier in this article, historically psychology has been criticized for reliance on convenience samples of participants mostly from the majority culture USA and Europe, especially college students [12; 26]. A number of scholars have criticized a psychology that purports to offer insights into the human condition around the globe but that only examines what have been termed WEIRD (Western, educated, and from industrialized, rich, democratic nations) participants [10]. Indeed, a well-known history of psychology is entitled *Even the Rat was White* [8]. However, in recent years there has been progress in diversifying psychology in terms of increased attention and inclusion of various cultural groups around the globe [33]. For instance, Rich and Gielen [28] have co-edited a volume of pathfinding innovative psychologists in history from around the globe, including representative chapters on scholars from Asia, Africa, and Mexico and the Caribbean, as well as Canada, the USA, and Europe. APA's Division of International Psychology is about fifteen years old (about the same age as positive psychology), also reflecting this development.

In positive psychology in particular, there has been increased research on cultural and international factors in recent years. This trend is apparent in the positive psychology textbooks. Early positive textbooks were strong on positive states and traits, but typically offered much less (if anything) on cultural and international variations [23; 24]. However, the recent revised edition of Snyder, Lopez, and Pedrotti's textbook *Positive Psychology* [31], offers several full chapters on cultural issues, and infuses the remainder of the book with diverse content as well. Additional evidence for the increased research in international positive psychology includes the publication of several relevant edited books. For example, Marujo and Neto [15] have a volume entitled *Positive Nations and Communities: Collective, Qualitative and Cultural Sensitive Processes in Positive Psychology* that includes methodological and scholarly disciplinary diversity as well as cultural diversity in its chapter contributions. Selin and Davey's *Happiness Across Cultures: Views of Happiness and Quality of Life in Non-Western Cultures* [30] includes diverse contributions reflecting research in such places as India, Tibet, Malaysia, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Tonga, an Australian aboriginal community, Malawi, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Rwanda, and Navajo and Inuit communities. Positive psychology conferences have been held in various nations around the globe, including Canada, the Netherlands, Russia, Italy, Portugal, Croatia, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, France, and Denmark, though as is apparent from this list, almost all of these conferences have been in Europe, reflecting a need for such conferences in Central and South America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. There are also several national level positive psychology associations, in nations such as Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary,

and Spain and there is the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), which has sponsored several conferences. The International Network on Personal Meaning, led by Paul Wong, should also be noted for its relevance to positive psychology. It has hosted its first Congress on Construction of Personal Meaning in July 2014 in Vancouver, Canada. As with the conferences, the national positive psychology associations tend to be based in North America and Europe, again reflecting a North American and European bias in representation, a bias that it should be noted is typical of the discipline of psychology as a whole, but perhaps more pronounced, at least in part due to the relative youth of positive psychology compared to other disciplines in psychology.

Also relevant to the discussion of international and cultural issues is the research from related disciplines outside of psychology. Historically, anthropology, like psychology has neglected positive human strengths and virtues compared with the amount of attention given to human suffering and misery. A search of the Anthrosource database [18. P. 5] “produced only two hits on ‘happiness’ in all of AAA’s 22 publications from 1930 to 2010 ... zero hits for ‘life satisfaction,’ three for ‘optimism,’ and three for ‘job satisfaction’”. Another anthropologist found that both anthropology reference books and introductory anthropology textbooks “typically have no entries on happiness or well-being” [34]. However, anthropology has recently seen a resurgence of interest in topics related to positive psychology, including personal, social, and cultural well-being [27]. For instance, anthropologists Mathews and Izquierdo have coedited a collection entitled *Pursuits of Happiness* [16] and anthropologist Jimenez has edited a book by the title *Culture and Well-Being: Anthropological approaches to Freedom and Political Ethics* [11]. Other recent books by anthropologists have examined particular positive emotional states. For example, Edith Turner [35] offers a book length examination of the anthropology of collective joy around the globe. Another recent anthropological approach to human strengths and virtues focuses on close examination and thick description of one or perhaps two cultural settings. An example of this approach is anthropologist Edward Fisher’s *The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing* [7], which focuses primarily on Guatemala and Germany, with discussions of the USA and some other examples.

Flow research is especially relevant to discussions of culture in positive psychology as it is one of the very few concepts that has been examined in depth in many places around the globe. For instance when one examines the list of human strengths and virtues catalogued and described in Peterson and Seligman’s classic handbook [19], which may be described as an Un-DSM (in that in many senses it represents the opposite pole from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual’s catalog of psychological disorders) [14], one quickly notes that it is the rare concept that has a large international database of evidence to support it. Among the twenty-four specific strengths and six broad virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) classified there — few have the type of international data that would lead one to conclude that these concepts are cultural universals, though positive psychologists aim to include only such strengths and virtues, and it is true that there is some cross-cultural support from non-psychological sources, such as religious scriptures, and cultural histories. Indeed, anthropologists find the search for cultural universals so challenging and so elusive, it is replete with controversy and few have dared to write books on the topic (for an exception, note the helpful though

brief book by Brown [1]). While flow is not the only positive psychology concept that has been researched extensively cross-culturally — see for instance work on subjective wellbeing and happiness by Diener and colleagues [6] — it is exceptional in the breadth and depth of the research it has generated internationally.

Is flow a cultural universal? That may remain open for debate, but it is worth citing Csikszentmihalyi himself who writes that “the experience of enjoyment is described in essentially the same terms by Thai villagers, by farmers in Somalia, by Navajo shepherds, and by industrial workers in Japan, Europe, and the United States” [3. P. 389]. Other research on flow has found evidence for its experience among white water rafters in Taiwan, Dutch soccer players, Italian and Chinese students, Indian musicians, and employees in the Netherlands [5; 25]. Of course one must wonder how similar or different these flow experiences are among the various individuals, activities, and cultures. Does curling up with a book [2] really yield the same experience of flow as experienced by female Canadian hockey players [13]? Certainly there are several examples of variations in the flow experience that suggest that perhaps there are even more variations yet to be discovered that may be revealed upon further research around the globe. For instance, as discussed earlier in this article, it is evident that musicians experience the flow element of altered time in a different manner than to many others who experience flow in activities where time is not as salient features in the main activity [21; 22]. In addition instrumental musicians may experience the flow element of merging of action and awareness in a different manner than persons in flow in other activities; the connection one experiences with the physical object of the instrument may indeed be qualitatively different than the experience of merged action and awareness that for example may be experienced by an orator giving a speech. Thus musical culture may reveal both similarities and differences with other cultural settings that lead to flow. Moneta [17] offers another example of cross-cultural differences discovered in flow in his examination of flow in Hong Kong Chinese students. This work found differences in the flow experience relating to internalized collectivist values and self-perceptions and Moneta argues that this population may seek an optimal state that is different from flow in that it emphasizes values and beliefs more in keeping with Taoist and Confucian thinking, such as prudence and inter-connectedness with others.

Flow research also reveals other issues relevant to positive psychology more broadly. Recently there has been considerable debate about the values implied by the positive psychology developed in the USA and Europe since the late 1990s [27]. Do the values, strengths, goals, and beliefs really reflect universal realities? Or does positive psychology really prescribe a version of a Good Life that would be considered anything but the Good Life in some other regions of the globe? There have been some similar debates in the past in psychology, particular with respect to moral development theories and research [20] and some of this work is indeed worthwhile to examine in considering its implications for a culturally nuanced positive psychology. Some scholars, notably Sundararajan [32], have argued the debate over morals in positive psychology is far from trivial, and she describes positive psychology as a donut missing at its core, a moral map. Her work reflects her background in both psychology and in the history of religions and points to a number of ways in which the good life as described by Seligman and by Confucius differ in critical ways, ways that are not currently reflected in the positive psychology literature, and ways

that must be incorporated if positive psychology is to be more applicable and relevant around the globe.

As for flow, one can cite a few examples of how cross-cultural research may point to several lacunae in its moral map. In particular, one must remember that flow is typically conceptualized as a morally neutral experience; it is not necessarily by definition described as an experience that is morally good or morally bad, though it does lead to feelings of pleasure and enjoyment after the flow activity experience has been completed. Thus a person may experience flow while engaged in prosocial behavior such as volunteering to help others, or in socially productive activity such as creating art or music, or career related activity such as studying for exams or preparing materials for one's jobs, but one may also experience flow while engaged in morally questionable or morally reprehensible activity. For instance, a group of bored teenagers may find breaking windows around town to be fun and flow-like, even it causes great financial damage to others. Some research has examined delinquent or near-delinquent groups and the flow experience, and its presence has been demonstrated in samples including Japanese motorcycle gangs among others [4]. One area of controversy is combat flow, where members of the military may experience flow in the course of their service [9]. Such work raises many ethical questions, including the issue of whether members of the military can and should be taught how to make their work, with its sometimes lethal consequences, to be more flow-like.

In sum, it is clear that flow offers many lessons in how to evaluate and to test positive psychology constructs cross-culturally and internationally, as a review of the various issues and research projects above indicates. The research on flow around the globe offers many models for assessing other positive traits, interventions, and outcomes, and such work, if appropriately conducted, is likely to advance both the science and the practice of positive psychology more generally.

**Conclusion.** Flow research offers an excellent model case for exploring some of the issues involved more generally in positive psychology research. In particular, flow, as a concept that has generated a large amount of research since the 1970s, offers helpful examples of how methodological innovation and diversity- such as the use of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods- may lead to more in-depth understanding of the topics of interest to positive psychologists. In addition, in comparison to research on flow, most other positive psychology concepts suffer from a relative paucity of cross-cultural and international research. The flow research around the globe demonstrates some of the issues that may be revealed when psychologists engage in more nuanced cultural work, and offers numerous examples of approaches to positive psychology that may help the discipline mature even further from its formal origins in the 1990s in the USA to a discipline that has even greater international relevance and impact. Flow research has offered psychology new theoretical and methodological tools and approaches that advance both the science and practice of positive psychology, and psychology more generally.

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## **ПОТОК И ОПТИМАЛЬНОЕ ПЕРЕЖИВАНИЕ: МЕТОДОЛОГИЧЕСКОЕ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ ДЛЯ ИНТЕРНАЛИЗАЦИИ И КОНТЕКСТУАЛИЗАЦИИ ПОЗИТИВНОЙ ПСИХОЛОГИИ. ЧАСТЬ 2**

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Данная статья является второй из двух статей, посвященных одному из ключевых понятий позитивной психологии — вершинным переживаниям, называемым «поток», разрабатываемым психологом Михаем Чикесентмихайи — в качестве примера для рассмотрения некоторых вопросов, связанных с интернализацией позитивной психологии. В частности, обсуждаются методологические, психодиагностические и теоретические вопросы исследования состояния потока. Описаны количественные, качественные и смешанные методы изучения состояния потока, включая интервью, анкетирование и кейс-стади. Рассматриваются примеры исследований состояния потока в разных странах мира, поднимающие вопросы относительно качества психодиагностического инструментария, а также кросс кросс-культурных универсалий/различий. Предлагаемый автором подход не сводится к рассмотрению качественных и количественных методов (или антропологических и психологических перспектив) как конкурирующих между собой, он направлен на развитие конструктивного диалога, который признает сильные и слабые стороны каждого подхода, чтобы стимулировать использование смешанных методов исследования сильных сторон человека, чем часто пренебрегают в кросс-культурных исследованиях. В первой статье прежде всего рассматривалось методологическое значение позитивной психологии, во второй — ее кросс-культурная значимость.

**Ключевые слова:** поток, оптимальное переживание, культура, интернационализация, позитивная психология, методы