Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- creator of the flow theory

A researcher - and a theory - with a profound impact on educational and developmental thinking and practice

2004
In this article I will introduce the man behind the flow theory, his life and his work - in short a compact biography about Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who will visit Denmark May 2004, participating as the main speaker at a flow-conference at the Danish University of Education May 12th.

Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory has gradually made its way into the educational domain - after having been well-known for a decade, within the psychological world. Since his breakthrough book, "Flow - the Psychology of Happiness" from the beginning of the 1990'ies more and more gatekeepers and professionals in the educational field have become aware of the potential of the flow-theory.

"Quality of Life Research Center" - and a new movement

In February-March 2004 I spent 2½ very interesting weeks at the Claremont Graduate University (CGU) of California, where professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his staff now work - after more than 20 years at the University of Chicago. For a couple of weeks I had the privilege of working and studying together with the professor and his very skilled, competent and inspiring staff of researchers at the so-called “Quality of Life Research Center”(QLRC) at Claremont.

"The Quality of Life Research Center was founded in 1999. It is a non-profit research institute that studies and disseminates knowledge concerning “positive psychology”, that is, human

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1 Frans Ørsted Andersen is the author of “Flow og pædagogik” (“Flow and education”) (2002) and "Flow, opmærksomhed og relationer" (“Flow, attention and relations”) (2004), both published in Danish by Dafolo (www.dafolo.dk)

strengths such as optimism, hope, creativity, responsibility, and courage” - it says in the opening lines of the QLRC brochure. “Positive psychology” is not just a notion - it is also the name of a fast growing new movement. You can check out details of this movement at www.positivepsychology.org or in the brand new book, “Positive Psychology - the Science of Happiness and Human Strengths” by Alan Carr.

Apart from Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, this movement includes, among others, Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania. Some readers may remember Martin Seligman from his 1980’ies theory of learned helplessness. Lately, however, Seligman has succeeded in developing a number of new “wave breaking” theories. This has resulted in the publication of a series of new interesting books, e.g. "Learned Optimism" or "Authentic Happiness”.

Some people may think “positive psychology” sounds a bit like yet another trendy “help-yourself-in-10-steps” craze. That is not the case at all. “Positive psychology” is based on thorough research into human thinking and action. This is supplemented by advanced analysis of present day society - which indeed can be characterized by growing problems. “Positive psychology” however, points out that attention should also be paid to the vast psychological resources and potential that each of us inherently posses - a potential that can be released, for the good of all, if attended to.

Such a potential is the flow capacity. We all have it at birth - and it can be a rich source of personal growth, learning, well-being and creativity. Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has shown through his extensive research that when people are engaged - even absorbed - in challenging but controllable tasks that are normally intrinsically motivating, they can experience a unique, enjoyable, worth-while psychological state, referred to as flow.

For flow experiences to occur

♦ we must have a good chance of completing the task, we’re engaged in
♦ there must be clear goals and immediate feedback, and
♦ a “flow-task” requires total concentration so we become deeply and effortlessly involved in it, so much so that we no longer think of worries and frustrations of everyday life

“Our sense of self disappears when involved in such tasks and paradoxically the sense of self emerges as strengthened after the task is completed. Time perception is altered during flow experiences. Hours can pass in what seem to be minutes and..."
minutes can seem like hours”, writes Alan Carr 6

And Marilyn Elias writes in “USA Today” that “People in flow may be sewing up a storm, doing brain surgery, playing a musical instrument or working a hard puzzle with their child. The impact is the same: A life of many activities in flow is likely to be a life of great satisfaction. And you don’t have to be a hotshot to get there”. 7

”Michael Saint Michael from the province of Csik”

The word “Csikszentmihalyi” is actually Hungarian for ”Saint Michael from the province of Csik”, as ”szent” equals ”saint”, ”Mihaly” is ”Michael” and the ”i” at the end stands for ”from”. ”Csik” was originally a Hungarian province, now belonging to Rumania.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was born in southeastern central Europe before World War II. Back then the map of Europe looked very different from now. Hungary was much larger than it is today. The Hungarian borders stretched far into present day Rumania, covering also the Csik province, which is actually itself a part of the larger region of Transylvania. Have no fear though, - Csikszentmihalyi ensures us that his family was never ever related to the unrivalled most famous person of the region, Count Dracula!

World War II, 1939-1945, tore up Europe - leaving devastated cities, divided regions, countries and families. The nazis - and later the Soviet invaders - drove millions from their homes, killing or deporting entire national, ethnic or political groups. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi had to flee the nazis too - and found himself in Rome, Italy after the end of the War. In the period of 1946-1950 he went to grammar school there, attending a classical language line, ”Torquato Tasso”.

After grammar school graduation for some years, he had different jobs in Italy. Then at the end of the 1950’s he managed to get into the US and enrolled as a student at the University of Chicago in Illinois. Here - with a few breaks - his talent and career would unfold for several decades to follow. It was in this period he had his international breakthrough with the theories - and books - of for example flow, creativity and the evolving self. During that time he would also become a revered US intellectual, appointed member of a number of different national, regional and local boards and committees. Among these are California Educational Master Plan, National Educational Goals Standards Review Panel, Child Labor Advisory committee, U.S. Department of Education - Center of Giftedness and Encyclopaedia Britannica - Board of Advisors.


He finished his bachelor degree at the University of Chicago in 1960, his Ph.D in 1965. And later he himself became a professor there - a position he held for the entire period of 1971 to 1999. He then moved to Claremont Graduate University (CGU), where he has been working since, establishing the Quality of Life Research Center, at the Peter F. Drucker School of Management, a department of the CGU.

**A unique career, igniting a new generation**

In spite of the fact that it was "Flow, the Psychology of Happiness" from 1992 that became the turning point for Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and the theory of “flow”, the professor actually gave an outline of the flow-theory already in "Beyond Boredom and Anxiety" from 1975. But after the breakthrough of “Flow, the Psychology of Happiness” a whole string of “hits” from the hands of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi saw the dawn of light - e.g. "The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the third Millennium (1993), "Creativity: the Psychology of Discovery and Invention" (1996) and "Finding Flow - the Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life" (1997)

All these books have been translated to many languages - besides to “world languages” like Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, German and French also to more regional languages like Japanese, Korean, Italian, Polish, Dutch, Swedish and Danish. But the “globalization” of Csikszentmihalyi’s theories is not just a matter of translation - a younger generation of professionals - across the US and in countries like Italy, Japan, Sweden and Denmark - are using the theories in new areas of practical application and research.

The educational domain is such an area. Flow is increasingly being used as a means of measuring and understanding pupils’ and students’ well being, learning, collaboration, attention and creativity in educational settings - from crèche to college. Researchers like Kevin Rathunde from the University of Utah, David Shernoff from the University of Chicago, Lars Lindström from Lärarhögskolan in Stockholm and Hans Henrik Knoop and myself (both from the Danish University of Education in Copenhagen) have conducted such research.

**Doing business with flow**

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi himself has not stopped applying his theories to new areas. Lately he has launched attempts to use "flow" as a way of understanding workplace organisation, well being, learning and productivity. Thus his latest publication, entitled "Good Business - Leadership, Flow and the Making of Meaning" (2003) has been received very well by the business community. The large German weekly, "Focus" (www.focus.de) recently had a feature edition on just that : "Glücklich im Job - das neue Buch des "Flow"-Forshers Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi”

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flashed on the front page” (meaning “Happy at work - the new book from “flow”-researcher, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi”).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is indeed a unique researcher, who in the 20th century developed a string of theories that now, at the dawn of the 21st century, are finding their way into ever new areas of application - and further research.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is the main speaker at a “flow”-conference at the Danish University of Education, May 12th sponsored by the LEGO Learning Institute.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi backpacking in the mountains of Montana with his dog.

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