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Introduction: Positive Change in Global World: Creative Individuals and Complex Societies

Modern society offers, day after day, challenges of increasing complexity. The global citizen is constantly stimulated by demand from the world of work, family and the social environment. Simultaneously they realize how necessary it is, in a busy and hectic life, to find some time for themselves, to cultivate their own physical and mental health, and to carve out spaces for leisure, hobbies, friends, family, and in general to what gives meaning to life (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). It is becoming more and more important to develop the ability to select activities, relationships, needs and desires in a creative and evolutionary way, and give these a privileged space, making them emerge from an offer that becomes gradually more and more extensive and varied. This book offers a possible interpretation of the many human experiences that emerge successfully from the challenges of modern complexity. The authors of the twelve chapters outline a vision of human experience as a close connection among personal characteristics, everyday experience, psychological well-being and elements of the socio-relational and environmental context. It is a correlation of elements originating from each one of these four areas that enables the development of positive changes, and allows their stabilization in the experience of individuals or groups, making them increasingly complex and creative. In this vision of the human experience, Flow, meant as a driving force for the subjective development, is a central element Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000; 1990). In the various chapters of the book, from the more general to the more specific ones, it clearly emerges that there are many new areas where the application of Flow Theory can be stimulating and produce innovative readings and new models of research. The Flow is seen as an experience that can be assessed and fostered in very different contexts, using different methodologies and approaches, and its function is highlighted in promoting change not only in the individual but also in relational situations and social contexts.

In the first two chapters there is an excursus of the characteristics and experiences which promote and permit positive change in socio-relational and individual perspectives. The Flow model is combined with other contemporary approaches, theories and intervention models, in order to envisage its use as a key to understanding the positive psychological experiences implied by the various approaches to reading psychological experience. Paolo Inghilleri exposes the theoretical background of the Optimal Experience Theory, highlighting the connections between Flow, subjective experience and social and cultural development. In the first chapter the author defines Optimal Experience, its relation with cultural artifact and cultural transmission, and with the development of autotelic characteristics of personality. After a socio-cultural collocation of the concept, Inghilleri proposes connections and parallels with classic and recent concepts of social and clinical psychology, like James

and Kohut's *empathy*, Bion's *negative capability*, Stern's *present moment* and Siegel's *mindfulness*. In the second chapter Giuseppe Riva focuses on the concept of personal change, considered as a complex process depending on the person, the issues and the situation. The author centers his attention on the capacity of Flow to allow the individual to consider the long-term personal goals from a different point of view, facilitating generativity and behavioral flexibility. This is related to the sense of Presence, considered as an experience of self-engagement that brings the individual to put their intention in action and provide the self with a feedback about the status of the activity. Riva proposes an analysis of cognitive change in which Presence and Flow collaborate in order to find creative solutions to emerging problems: Presence allows the individual to perceive the experiential conflicts, and pushes the cognitive system to resolve them, while the way to find a solution to the perceived conflicts is often shown by past experiences of Flow.

The following three chapters are dedicated to new approaches and research models that use emergent communicational and relational instruments to promote the Flow experience and consolidate positive change and psychological well-being. In the third chapter Riva G. & Gaggioli address the issue of cyber technologies as a means for promoting optimal experience and well-being. They present an overview of researches in which cyberpsychologists, while studying the different processes of change related to the use of new technologies, show that digital instruments of communication and other related technologies can be used to improve personal development and well-being. In this order of ideas, the authors introduce the concept of Positive Technology, detailing three different uses of technological instruments to perform personal changes: *Hedonic*, that qualifies daily life introducing positive and pleasant experiences; *Eudaimonic*, that supports the individual in reaching engaging and self-actualizing experiences; *Social/Interpersonal*, that supports and improves social integration and connectedness with other individuals. Gaggioli & colleagues, in the fourth chapter, deepen the opportunities provided by new technologies for the development of well-being experiences. They propose the concept of Networked Flow, in which they hypothesize that participation in social networks promote creativity as a product of the group, intended as a virtual and intellectual community. In Networked Flow group creativity materializes in the production of artifacts that are immediately shared and used in or applied to the network's group itself, increasing its complexity and its faculty to develop further occasions of shared Flow and creativity. In chapter five, Riva E. & colleagues propose a new model to use Flow in clinical settings, to promote positive change, well-being and the development of a more complex and flexible Self. While cognitive-behavioral therapies have developed various instruments derived from Positive Psychology models and theories, the contamination with psychodynamic psychotherapies has remained minimal. The authors consider the Flow Experience as a psychodynamic construct, and propose to insert the analysis and promotion of Flow in psychodynamic medium and long term psychotherapies. Three ways to approach Flow in a clinical setting are described in

the chapter: to *investigate* it in past experience; to *promote* its development in daily present experience and to *develop* Flow situations inside the psychotherapy sessions. These concepts are described in short case studies.

Chapters from six to ten propose the application of Flow in different social contexts, some of them facing new frontiers, such as the environment or politics, others describing the current developments in areas of interest such as education, work or sport. Rainisio & colleagues, in chapter six, describe an application of Flow Theory to environmental psychology. In literature both the environmental preference and the psychological restoration due to interaction with natural landscapes are justified referring to biological legacies or universal psychological characteristics. In this contribution the authors define the concept of *Flowability* as a subjective criterion -developed during daily cultural experience- used to evaluate a place and consider it as potentially regenerative. Transcultural data are reported in support of this. In chapter seven Boffi & colleagues explore the implication of the use of the Flow concept in political participation. Just as well-being has been considered, in literature, one of the central indicators for social development, often the indicators used to detect the presence and evolution of well-being have taken into account more material aspects than subjective experience. The authors propose that an eudaimonic perspective can fruitfully explain the link between individuals' well-being and participation, and Flow can be used as a referential theory to describe the mechanisms affecting both personal growth and social context, resulting in an inspiring notion to design participative settings: if those in charge of promoting participation policies were informed of such a distribution of flow-generating activities in each community, it would be possible for them to design new forms of participation more sensitive to people's preferences and more likely to succeed. Cavanagh & Shernoff, in chapter eight, explore the relationship between the school learning environment and psychological positive theory and experience. Specific attention is addressed to the influence of Flow in classroom experiences and of optimal learning environments reported by scholars in compulsory education. Two empirically validated construct models are presented that incorporate the Flow Theory and classroom learning environment constructs: these are the *Capabilities-Expectations Model of Student Engagement in School Learning* and the *Environmental Complexity Model of Optimal Learning environments*. Each of them enables experiences and the respective conducive conditions to become operational and foster research besides giving essence to design of positive change in schooling. Transcultural and transnational comparisons are reported. In chapter nine Muzio & colleagues discuss the role of optimal experience in sports psychology. The authors deepen the tools and strategies available for trainers and instructors to activate positive change in athletes and teams, and present research data on Flow in sports, both in regard to the evaluation of subjective experience and the interventions that can increase the chance of finding Flow. Inghilleri & Cesaro face the work environment from a new perspective: their contribution concerns a research on small enterprises ruled by single families. In this context, which constitutes the lifeblood of the Italian

commercial substrate, family relationships and job roles merge and mingle, creating potentially explosive situations but also rich in terms of investment of emotional and psychic energy. In chapter ten the authors present the impact of training on the relationships and good management based on Flow Theory and its applications on family enterprises.

The last two chapters of the book regard persons or situations that can promote the subjective ability to detect and foster Flow experiences. In chapter eleven Nakamura develops a model of mentoring which relies on the environment built through relational dimensions. Her analysis shows how a true mentor transmits knowledge and skills together with values supporting a sense of professional responsibility. In this perspective we can observe, from an individual point of view, the development of an autotelic personality, and from a cultural point of view, the transmission of excellence. In the chapters second half the author deepens the model proposed through the presentation of a case study taken from the martial art of *aikido*, in which the relation among individual involvement, mentors features and environmental characteristics clearly emerges, allowing for the promotion of subjective complexity and multiple experiences of mentoring and cultural transmission. In chapter twelve, through the exposition of research data, Fishman & Barendsen describe the impact of “quality” of everyday time and of the subjective perception of “time well spent” in the development of a style of life that may foster the encounter with subjective optimal experience. The authors investigated how people use time, what they consider to be a waste of time, and demonstrated, through the interaction of the Flow Model with other constructs, how time well spent with family and friends is paramount in terms of what they think about quality and the prioritization of quality in their lives.

The wide array of disciplines and applications described in the different chapters strengthens the idea of the importance of positive change in the experience of individuals or groups. As the field continues to grow, we eagerly expect extensive on-the-field trials as well as comparative results with existing methods of practice, supporting the continuous growth of new applications.

In the end, we hope that the contents of this book will stimulate more research on the social, cognitive and human factors connected to the experience of “positive change” and on how to make the best of it in the different fields discussed in the chapters. We thank all the authors for their great work in making this book what we believe it to be – a significant contribution to understanding the roles and importance of positive change in a range of personal and interactive situations. In particular, the book aimed to underline the role played by Flow in promoting change not only to the individual but also in relational situations and social contexts.

References

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