



Positive Psychologists on Positive Psychology: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Interview by
Aaron Jarden

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University, and Director of the Quality of Life Research Center. He is noted for his work in the study of happiness and creativity, and the immensely popular book *Flow*. Martin Seligman has described Mihaly as “the world’s leading researcher on positive psychology”.

In general terms and in your mind, what are some of the distinctive features of positive psychology?

The distinctive feature is that it allows me to interact with people whom otherwise I would have had a hard time finding. I’ve been in this field for 35 or 40 years and I’ve always felt marginalized and now suddenly, there are all kinds of interesting people that we can deal with, interact with and stimulate each other ideas. That’s the field aspect of positive psychology. The question could refer to the content and ideas, or to positive psychology as a social endeavor (I hate the word movement), so I’ll give you the explanation in terms of the joint endeavor. In terms of the content, it is a very varied assortment of different things. It’s hard to find an exact common element of positive psychology, except in terms of the fact that everybody is trying to understand how to leverage and increase positive aspects of human experience and human life. That can vary from physical wellbeing to alternate meanings of life, and the subjective aspects. I’m mostly interested in the subjective quality of experience, as you probably know.

Are there any key events that changed the course of your career into moving towards positive psychology?

I never moved towards it, I always did it since I wrote my dissertation in 1965, which is now about a half century ago. That was essentially about one aspect of positive psychology that I’m still involved with, namely creativity, which I think is an important aspect. Back then there was no positive psychology to turn towards. We just started it with Martin Seligman in Hawaii in the late 1990s, when we met accidentally there and we kind of decided we should have a more visible group studying the aspects of human behavior that had been neglected by psychology for half a century. This involved all of the things that people are now pursuing and calling positive psychology. But to us, as we started the whole thing, we had no idea where it would go. I was just hoping to be able to connect with some colleagues across the US and elsewhere who had the same interest that I had. I envisioned a little special interest group of 50 or 60 people who were interested in this issue; but at the recent World Congress on Positive Psychology in Philadelphia there were 1,600 people from all over and that’s almost scary,



because I think good ideas are probably more often killed by premature promises than they are killed by opposition. Suddenly we have a huge response from everyone who was kind of frustrated and stymied by psychology previously. I saw the field growing so quickly and so exponentially into the future, and that's why I started this positive development PhD programme here at Clermont University. I thought, 'hey, we should begin to train people to act as kind of gatekeepers or at least supports to this developing field' so that it's not all kind of superficial enthusiasm, but it's grounded in critical, reflective, even skeptical, research as science should be.

What do you think are the best things that positive psychology has achieved to date?

It has suddenly broken across the whole globe, and connected people who would not have known each other before. I mean there you are in New Zealand and we are talking about these issues and we could turn and talk to South Africa, Korea, Germany, and know that there are people there who are also concerned with the improvement of human life and true psychological understanding. Just to create this network has been sensational in such a short period. People are now beginning to really take seriously these things that before were so marginal to people's interests, like gratitude, or forgiveness, or courage, all things that people thought were kind of really minor or uninteresting areas of studying psychology. Students now can really get PhDs done by writing a good research plan to study these issues at the human level. So there are two things. One is empowering people to feel that what they are doing is not flying in the wilderness, but there is an echo coming back from all over – that's very important. The other one is that the subject matter of positive human activity is being taken seriously and researched and is entering the vocabulary of psychology.

What are the current issues of concern for the field of positive psychology?

The ones that I sense are really important are to maintain a healthy balance between the basic research, and application and discrimination, because it's very easy to get excited by the ideas and then say, 'Ok, I read a book and now I can be a life coach' or something. If too many people take it at that level, positive psychology will have a very short life because it's not so easy to change things. If we promise and come across as knowing all the answers and being able to apply them, and then they don't work, then the public will say, 'It's just another fad, forget about it', and positive psychology will get a bad name. So we need both, we need to take seriously the issues. One of the things that positive psychology is now doing, kind of routinely, is that so many people are using so-called interventions. Interventions last for a few weeks of doing something, like writing letters to people who you are grateful for, or another intervention may be to think about what you are grateful about and so forth; and then thinking that these types of interventions can be spread around to everyone to make life better. Now, those interventions are really important to understanding the mechanisms of gratitude, but as solutions to the human condition I don't think that's where it's at. The real interventions in our life are family, school, jobs, and the political systems in which we live: these interventions don't last two weeks, they last all our lives. I mean, if you go to school, it's thirteen years of sitting at a bench, and that's an intervention and it's much more powerful in many ways than what we can come up with. Positive psychology needs to inform schools and change their pedagogy so that the intervention of education is going to be more growth-producing for humans. And the same thing for jobs, the same thing for families, and so on. I think eventually we have to realize that if we want to be successful, we have to address the kinds of institutional context in which we live, which are the ones intervening in our lives in a substantive way. The kind of

interventions which we can do is to learn what works and how it works, and it may be a good adjunct to therapy in some ways, but we can't stop there and believe that we will solve the problems of human kind by doing those things. That's why I'm worried about prematurely institutionalizing positive psychology so that we have a canon—this is what positive psychology is, this is how you apply it. If we do this now, we are going to paint ourselves into a very narrow corner of reality. We have to keep being open and growing conceptually and as practitioners; both our practice and our knowledge have to stay open and grow.

Which discipline can positive psychology learn from most, moving forward?

Other disciplines outside of psychology that are the closest in some ways to our field are biology on the one side, and sociology on the other. Both of those are quite relevant to add to our knowledge base. But then you could also jump and say, 'Well how about spirituality?'. That's one of the most attractive fields that our students respond to, meditation and various forms of Buddhism practice and so forth, and again, I think those are very valuable and we should by all means understand them better and integrate them in what we do, but I don't think they have the final answer. Because of my original work in creativity and my interest in evolution, I really believe that for these new idea systems to really become influential and paradigm shifting, they have to grow, they have to be open, they have to keep refining their objectives and their purpose as they go, rather than say, 'Ok, this is it'.

Who do you look up to in the field? Or who do you think is going to lead the field forward over the next 10 years?

I don't want to single out any person because there are so many, but I know that when we started positive psychology with Martin Seligman, we started it with the Akumal conference in Mexico. When we decided to start, I insisted that what we really needed to influence is the new generation. So we developed this method, which was to write to fifty of the most influential psychologists in the US; and Martin knew them because he was just elected president of the APA (American Psychological Association). We asked each one of these fifty people if they knew of a former student or psychologist under 30 who would be interested in working on these issues that we wrote in a couple of sentences, defining positive psychology. We were after people who were interested in these issues and who, at age 50, were likely to become chairperson of a psychology department. So that was our idea. All of these fifty people answered and sent us names, and then we wrote to these fifty nominees and we asked them to send us their CVs and statements. Then we selected 20 out of them, and invited them for a week, all expenses paid, to a fishing village in Mexico called Akumal. All twenty candidates accepted and we had this week in which we were always, 24 hours a day, in swimming trunks and flip flops and talking, just very informally, about what we saw was missing in psychology and what we could do to make it right. Of the twenty people, since then half of them have written books and the other half have written influential articles. For example, Barbara Fredrickson was there, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Tim Kasser, and John Haidt—all of those people. So this method kind of worked, because it represented something that I believe in, which is that we have to appeal to the imagination of the minds of young people because whatever we do, it is not going to be carried over by us, meaning Martin or myself. We just started it out and we hoped to leave it in good shape, but the real responsibility is in the hands of that generation.

Are there any positive psychology projects going on that excite you, or that you are involved with that you are excited about?

Well, it's not directly positive psychology but it's because of the kind of work in positive psychology that I've been doing, even before positive psychology started; so, for instance, there is a new academy in China which is trying to be a kind of intellectual spark plug for the country. They built a huge campus, a beautiful elegant campus, and they invited masters from other places to go and start studios where people from the government and business can go and sit around and talk about how to apply, for instance, flow and creativity. I didn't need to go there and start a studio. I want to go and find out what's going on, but I don't plan to move and learn Chinese from scratch at my age. That's one interesting thing that is going on. Otherwise I continue to do research with my students on the same kinds of things that I did before, namely flow. There are a couple of new articles on flow in chess which I think are very interesting, and potentially kind of paradigm shifting. Also work on creativity: I just came back from the European creativity conference in Portugal, where people are using some of my ideas to do research and I collaborate with some of those people. A lot of my energy is directed to making this PhD programme at Claremont work, because it's not easy to start something from scratch and make it work. So that's one thing I'm working on.

What's one piece of advice for individuals looking to help and contribute to grow the field of positive psychology?

If they want to contribute, the only advice I can give is that they should do good work. They should take it seriously, they should not assume that they know what it is, but they should try to push the envelope and try to understand better what humans need for the next step in evolution and try to make it work. That's what they should be focusing on. It needs to be something that they decide. The important thing is not to take it lightly and not to take it dogmatically: there are two extremes.

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