

Optimal Experience and Meaning: Which Relationship?

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Abstract

A large number of studies conducted in the last twenty years show that optimal experience is a positive and complex condition in which cognitive, motivational and emotional components coexist in a coherent and articulated reciprocal integration.

By virtue of its positive psychological features, optimal experience has been sometimes misunderstood as a state which automatically brings about well-being and development. Several studies have disconfirmed this assumption, showing that the outcomes of optimal experience are not automatically positive. Rather, they vary according to the features of the associated activities and to the value system of the cultural environment.

Researchers in this domain have been primarily devoted their attention to the structure of the activities that promote optimal experience, and to the goal pursuit they facilitate. Goals are given a prominent role in development in that they provide individuals with practical orientation and purpose in life. But something is missing in this framework: meaning. What do we know about the relationship between optimal experience and meaning making? Based on findings coming from different contexts and cultures, this paper tries to give optimal experience a role within the long-term process of meaning-making.

Keywords: Optimal experience, meaning, individual development, culture

Within the psychological literature on well-being, flow or optimal experience has been often misinterpreted as an emotion, as a purely cognitive construct, or as a component of the motivational system. A large number of studies conducted in the last twenty years, on the contrary, show that it is a multifaceted experiential state, in which cognitive, motivational and emotional components coexist in a coherent and complex reciprocal integration (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005a; Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2008).

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The universality and relevance of optimal experience to individual functioning has been supported through cross-cultural findings. Research in this domain was primarily focused on the structure of the activities that promote optimal experience, and on the development they foster through goal setting and skill enhancement, thus providing individuals with practical orientation and purposes in life.

However, optimal experience does not automatically bring about well-being and development. Several studies have highlighted that its outcomes vary according to the features of the associated activities and their role within the value system of the individuals and of their social environment. More specifically, at the individual level optimal experience has to be contextualized in the theoretical framework of daily psychological selection (Csikszentmihalyi & Massimini, 1985). Psychological selection results from the individuals' differential investment of attention and resources on the information available in their environment. This process is of course influenced by the cultural context, but it is also related to predispositions, previous experiences and their appraisal, hierarchy of priorities and values that individuals ceaselessly build and shape throughout their lives. From this perspective, therefore, another dimension has to be taken into account in the investigation of optimal experience: meaning (Emmons, 2005). The interpretation of reality through the attribution of meanings to environmental and personal situations is a peculiar feature of human beings (Jablonka & Lamb, 2005). Moreover, meaning has to be considered at two levels: the individual and the cultural one.

What do we know about the relationship between optimal experience, meaning making and goal setting and pursuit? As reported by scholars from different disciplines (Bruni & Porta, 2006; Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) good life is not necessarily related to good feelings. People can commit themselves to the cultivation of activities or to the pursuit of goals that they perceive as valuable, but that undermine their quality of life in the short term (Sen, 1992). The relevance of life activities and goals is related to the meaning individuals attribute to them (Emmons, 2005).

In periods of stress or change, high levels of meaning making are associated with low levels of subjective well-being (Park, 2005; Shmotkin, 2005). Nevertheless, a meaning centered coping strategy promotes adjustment and well-being in stressful situations, such as chronic disease (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998; Folkman & Greer, 2000). In Antonovsky's construct of Sense of Coherence (SOC; Antonovsky, 1987), the attribution of meaning to life events plays a paramount role. It is related to the capacity to establish a coherence among different sensorial stimuli, referring them to a unitary and shared shape, or Gestalt (Amrikhan & Greaves, 2003). Several studies have highlighted that meaningfulness supports SOC even in situations characterized by low controllability or manageability. For example, the high levels of SOC reported by people with

degenerative diseases are related to meaningfulness, rather than to the objectively low potential for controllability of the situation (Flannery & Flannery, 1990).

Before or besides being individual constructs, meanings derive from the cultural context and its value system (Smith, Christopher, Delle Fave, & Bhawuk, 2002). Specific activities or goals do not necessarily have the same meaning or function in different cultures: therefore, we should not expect them to have an invariant relation to well-being or individual development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Individuals differ in their behavior and goal orientation according to their cultural background. Differences substantially concern the weight and the meaning attributed to collective norms, daily activities, and social roles (Triandis, 1994; Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000). For example, most human communities attribute importance to formal education. However, both the degree of relevance and the meaning of education can vary across cultures. The person is connected to the cultural meaningful world through processes of internalization and externalization (Vaalsiner, 1998, 2007). Individual experience of the world “transforms collective-cultural meanings into a personal-cultural system of sense” (Vaalsiner, 2007, p. 62), which undergoes a personal reconstruction and can be externalized through behaviors, goals, and strivings. Through meaning making humans organize their experience moment by moment (Kegan, 1994), integrating events and information into their own life history and developmental trajectory (Singer, 2004). Moreover, meaning making is a dynamic process: throughout their lives, individuals ceaselessly revise their experiences, attribute new meanings to them, expand or narrow their own meaning system.

Individuals can attribute meaning to activities that are not valued or approved by the cultural context. The consistency or discrepancy between meanings that the individual and the cultural environment attribute to a given activity is another critical issue. In case of consistency, the social context will support individuals’ investment of resources on that activity, encouraging its cultivation, and eventually deriving benefits from the competencies individuals develop in that activity. In case of discrepancy, a conflict can arise between the individual’s meaning making process and the social expectations, leading the person to marginalization.

Within the framework of psychological selection, and taking into account the dimension of meaning, optimal experience can be considered both an antecedent and an outcome. Due to the psychological rewards provided by this condition, the associated activities will be preferentially replicated and cultivated in the long run, thus affecting both the developmental trajectory of the individuals – their psychological selection pattern – and their social integration and participation. On the other side, through the dynamic features of the meaning-making process and the ceaselessly interaction with the environment, activities previously ignored by the individual can become opportunities for optimal experience, sources of new meanings, or both.

In the following pages, results from different studies will be illustrated, in order to shed light on this crucial aspect. The findings were gathered by means of Flow Questionnaire (FQ, Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Delle Fave & Massimini, 2004; Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, & Delle Fave, 1988) and Life Theme Questionnaire (LT, Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979; Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003a). FQ invites participants to report the occurrence of optimal experience in their lives, to list the associated activities. The psychological features of optimal experience during these activities are then assessed, through 0-8 scales evaluating the perceived levels of affective, cognitive and motivational variables. LT investigates perceived positive and negative life influences, present challenges, future life goals, and the role of school, work and family in participants' lives. The two questionnaires together provide information on participants' pattern of psychological selection: optimal activities, determinants of individual history, and personal growth trajectories.

Cultural Meanings and Optimal Experience

Several studies highlighted that optimal experience shows constant features across cultures, and the associated activities represent complex opportunities for concentration, engagement and skill development. However, cultures shape individuals' well-being, both providing a meaning-making system for daily events and interactions, and fostering or limiting opportunities for growth and self-expression (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004).

These two issues were empirically investigated in different research works. A study involving over 900 participants from different continents (Delle Fave, 2007) highlighted some shared cross-cultural aspects, such as the psychological features of optimal experience, and the categories of activities primarily associated with it. Productive activities (work and study) and structured leisure (sports, arts and crafts, hobbies) were reported as prominent opportunities for optimal experience. Socialization, family interactions and the use of media followed, with remarkably lower percentages.

Other studies identified cross-cultural differences. More specifically, some activity categories were only or prominently associated with optimal experience by participants belonging to a specific culture (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2004). For example, Rom people emphasized family interactions as major opportunities for optimal experience. This is not surprising, since the family represents the core unit of Rom communities. Rom extended families maintain strong ties even through long distances; social cohesion is supported through marriages and a strong social hierarchy based on age; knowledge is passed on through oral teachings and vertical transmission of behavioral norms, while little relevance is attributed to formal education (Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003). Indonesian participants

associated optimal experience with religious practice more frequently than the other samples. Religion traditionally permeates individual and social life in most South-East Asian cultures, and its potential for fostering life satisfaction and well-being has been previously highlighted (Myers, 2000). Iranian participants did not report any opportunity for optimal experience in the domain of sports, arts and crafts, while they primarily quoted reading, an activity that supports development through acquisition of knowledge and competences, also promoting autonomous information processing.

Findings from a cross-cultural study on adolescents further highlighted the impact of the weight and meaning attributed by cultures to specific domains on individual psychological selection. Data were collected through FQ and LT among girls attending high school in Nepal, Italy, and Uganda (Delle Fave, Bassi, Cavallo, & Stokart, 2007; Stokart, Cavallo, Fianco, & Lombardi, 2007).

Girls from Italy and Nepal lived in urban areas with their families. Participants from Uganda lived in a Catholic boarding school; all of them came from poor rural villages, where female illiteracy and early marriage are the rule. Results were consistent with these contextual features. Italian adolescents primarily associated optimal experience with structured leisure activities such as sport, arts and hobbies, and less frequently with studying. Nepalese teenagers prominently associated optimal experience with learning tasks (Nag, White, & Peet, 1980). Girls from Uganda referred with similar frequencies to study and structured leisure. Religious practices were associated with optimal experience by Nepalese and Ugandan girls, while only Nepalese teenagers referred to family interactions (Stokart et al., 2007; Delle Fave et al., 2007).

The participants from the three groups quoted work as their primary goal for the future. However, adolescents from Uganda provided the highest percentage of answers in this domain (77%), compared with Nepalese (38%) and Italian girls (31%). Ugandan and Nepalese girls often specified which kind of job they were looking for: lawyer, nurse, obstetrician, engineer; on the contrary, Italian teenagers were more concerned on the quality of experience associated to work: gratification, self-actualization, expression of creativity. Getting married and having children was prominently reported by Italian teenagers, while it was rarely quoted by the other two groups.

The association of optimal experience with studying represents an important prerequisite for adolescents' future ability to cope with the challenges of the productive world (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Larson, 2000). Several studies have dealt with the quality of experience associated with learning (Bassi, Teca, Delle Fave, & Caprara, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Hektner, 2001; Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Learning can be a very rich source of engagement, personal satisfaction, and meaningful information (Delle Fave, 2004). Its effectiveness as an opportunity for optimal experience can facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge and the active

participation of the individual in the society. However, the cultural meaning attributed to formal education can influence its attractiveness as an opportunity for resource investment. In Western countries studying is a mandatory activity; nevertheless, several nations are facing problems such as students' poor performance and drop-out from high schools. On the opposite, in many developing countries, such as Nepal and Uganda, getting access to high school education is still a privilege, especially for girls. Moreover, in these countries the admission exam to high school is very selective (Cummings & Altbach, 1997). As concerns our participants, Italian girls took formal education for granted. On the contrary, students from Nepal and Uganda perceived education as a precious opportunity to get a good job and to achieve a prestigious social role (Rosenbaum, Kariya, Settersten, & Maier, 1990).

As for leisure, structured activities such as reading, sport, arts, and hobbies help adolescents organize their free time, and support the search for high challenges and active involvement (Verma & Sharma, 2003; Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003). From the perspective of collective meaning, the prominence of these activities as opportunities for optimal experience among the Italian adolescents in our study was an indicator of the social and family expectations on these teenagers: they benefited from a large amount of free time and enjoyed a certain amount of freedom from adult control (Verma & Larson, 2003). Also girls from Uganda, who lived in a peer community far from their village and traditional lifestyle, could enjoy some free time after school. The cultural context nevertheless influenced the content of leisure (Verma & Sharma, 2003): Italian girls prominently quoted sport practice and competitions, and girls from Uganda reported traditional arts and crafts. Nepalese adolescents, on the opposite, after school were involved in domestic works and in the caregiving of younger siblings, with little time to cultivate leisure activities.

Cultural differences in the meaning of family also emerged from the participants' answers. Girls from Nepal and Uganda lived in a collectivistic society, characterized by the key role of joint family in the transmission of cultural values, goals, and lifestyle. The association of family interactions with optimal experience among Nepalese participants confirmed the consistency between the individual and the cultural value system. The Italian adolescents focused on family as a future goal, however referring to the building of their own family with a partner; on the contrary, the other two groups did not report family among relevant goals. In Western post-industrial societies marriage and parenthood are autonomously pursued by each individual, while in Nepal and Uganda they represent stages of life that are planned and built by and inside the community, with limited autonomy of the individual. For this reason some of the Ugandan adolescents reported their concern about being forced to get married before completion of their studies.

Individual Meaning: The Commitment to Faith

Religion represents a complex set of behavioral rules and norms that can be actualized within the daily context, thus providing individuals with short- and long-term opportunities for action and goal setting (WHOQOL SRPB Group, 2005). Religion can also convey a world outlook, thus supporting the process of meaning making and allowing individuals to transcend their own limited self (Emmons, 2005; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). In Western countries, the growing secularization has made religious beliefs and practice the outcome of an individual choice, rather than of cultural influences. We investigated religious practice as an opportunity for optimal experience, and its influence on psychological selection and meaning making among a group of Italian Catholic adults, comprising lay people and people consecrated in various religious institutions (Coppa & Delle Fave, 2007). Optimal experience was reported by 97% of the participants, and it was most frequently associated with religious practice, followed by sport and hobbies, and by reading. Religious practice mainly comprised prayer and meditation, and to a lower extent preaching, teaching religion and catechism, formation meetings.

A comparative analysis was conducted to investigate the features of optimal experience during religious practice and in other activities. Basic shared features were identified: regardless of the activity associated with optimal experience, participants reported high values of involvement and intrinsic motivation, clear ideas, focused attention and control, the perception of high challenges and moderately high skills, enjoyment, relaxation and interest, clear feedback from the activity. However, some significant differences were also detected. During religious practice participants reported significantly higher values of intrinsic motivation, perceived challenges, and self-consciousness, as well as significant lower scores of clear goals.

These findings can be interpreted considering faith as the core of the individual meaning making process for these participants. As concerns intrinsic motivation, faith represents the inner and intrinsic spring of religious practice. Several participants emphasized their free adherence to a personal relationship to God, through prayer and through serving others. The association of religious practice with challenges significantly higher than in other optimal situations, and also higher than personal skills, can be referred to the peculiarity of the faith context. The believer faces a dimension transcending human abilities and rational understanding. As quoted by some of the participants, "Religion is not a matter of abilities", "there is awareness of one's own extreme limits", "I recognize to be a little nothing, however filled by His greatness". During religious practice, and especially during prayer, participants also reported significant lower levels of perceived goals than in other activities. This finding is consistent with the free surrender to God. As reported by one of the participants, "Prayer is staying in front of God. I do not care

about how much I will be able to pray or meditate". Finally, religious practice was associated with significantly higher values of self-consciousness than other activities. Such practice requires awareness: scriptures of most religious traditions emphasize that awareness and watchfulness are substantial prerequisites for prayer and meditation, and that distraction is the major and most usual difficulty, deviating the mind on worldly worries and desires. The monitoring of one's own mental state is therefore necessary to maintain the attention focused on God.

Results coming from LT also showed the paramount role of faith in permeating the believers' life, in influencing their daily behaviour, their interpretation of events and relationships, and their future orientations. Religious practice provided participants with challenging and rewarding opportunities for action in the daily life, at the same time offering long-term meanings (Massimini & Delle Fave, 1991).

An Environment Providing Meaning: The Role of Family in Adolescence

As a period of change and identity construction, adolescence is a challenge by itself: teens face internal and interpersonal conflicts on the path toward adulthood. Such turmoil can be smoothed by a stable and supportive family context, which enables adolescents to find their own way in the world, and to look for opportunities for action and engagement in the domains of education, hobbies, peer relations and personal growth (Cobb, 1996; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995; Simons et al., 1996). In particular, the previous development of a positive attachment relationship with parents is a prerequisite for the unfolding of exploratory behavior and for the search for meanings (Steinberg, 1987; Sokol-Katz, Dunham, & Zimmerman, 1997). The family maintains its role as a safe context, where teenagers find relax as well as life models and advice (Bassi & Delle Fave, 2006; Bowlby, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1991; Larson, Richards, Moneta, Hollmbeck, & Duckett, 1996; Nurmi, Poole, & Kalakovski, 1993). On the contrary, empirical research work emphasized the negative effect of dysfunctional attachment patterns and family conflicts on adolescents' autonomy and identity building (Allen et al., 1996; Osuna, Alarcon, & Luna, 1992). Youth living in problematic families have to search for adult models in a social environment which is not always supportive or edifying, without guides to sufficiently rely upon, especially from the affective and developmental point of view.

The impact of the family context on adolescents' opportunities for optimal experience, goal setting and meaning making was investigated in a comparative study, involving girls living at home and girls entrusted to Institutions for Custody of Minors because of severe family maladjustment (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2000). Differences were detected in the activities associated with optimal experience by the two groups. Girls living at home most frequently reported sports and hobbies, followed by studying, reading, and the use of media. The

institutionalized adolescents primarily reported socialization – mostly with peers - and the use of media, followed by spending time with the boyfriend. In the description of future life goals, girls living with their family quoted academic and professional achievements while girls in institutions focused in equal percentages on work and family-related-goals.

The prominence of interactions with peers as occasions for optimal experience is a quite uncommon result in the studies on this topic. Cross-cultural research showed the two-sided effect of peer interactions on adolescents' quality of experience (Verma & Larson, 2003). Spending free time with peers provides fun, positive affect and pleasure, it fosters the development of social competences, but it is often associated with low mobilization of personal skills. Our findings highlighted the relevance assumed by these relationships for adolescents deprived of stable family interactions. Peers played the role of advisors and models in the development of institutionalized girls, providing them with behavioral instructions, values, goals and a meaning making system not necessarily suited to the challenges and features of the adult life. Besides socialization, girls living in institution associated optimal experience with leisure activities characterized by short-term relevance and low level of complexity, such as watching TV and listening to music. These activities belong to the domain of relaxed leisure: they promote fun, but also passiveness, disengagement, low levels of affect and involvement (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Delle Fave & Bassi, 2000). While girls living at home associated optimal experience with creative and demanding activities, institutionalized girls were exposed to opportunities for action low in complexity and in potential for growth promotion (Larson, 2000; Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003; Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005a). As for future goals, girls living in institutions were looking forward to building their own family. Matched with the high amount of resources they invested in close relationships with peers, this finding can be ascribed to the need for a stable context providing intimacy, support and meaning in life (Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998; Patterson, Sochting, & Marcia, 1992).

Similar findings were obtained among adolescents living in disrupted and/or harmful family environments. The most striking results were obtained with a group of teenagers living in the streets of Nairobi, Kenya: only 2 participants out of 13 reported optimal experiences in their lives (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005b). Such a lack of optimal experiences and complex challenges exposes these adolescents to the risk of getting involved in deviant and criminal activities. These activities are often structured and engaging enough to require skills refinement, control of the situation and focused attention, thus providing optimal experiences and channelling the individual resources towards goals that are however in contrast with cultural meanings and values. The shortcomings of these activities at the social and developmental levels are obvious; nevertheless, their psychological appeal has to be taken into account in rehabilitation programs.

Getting Hooked: Drug Addiction and the Loss of Meaning

The reasons why people take drugs widely vary. Chemicals can lower perceived stress in daily life and promote relaxation (Siqueira, Diab, Bodian, & Rollnitzky, 2001; Williams & Parker, 2001). Marginalization, poverty and low education also facilitate drug addiction (Rizzini, 1998).

However, it is not possible to identify a “typical” consumer profile, either at the psychological or at the socio-cultural level (Olievenstein, 2000). Beside individual and social differences, people take drugs to attain a positive experience, or to reduce unpleasant feelings, with some variations depending on the substance (Aarons, Brown, Tice, & Coe, 2001; Nesse, 1994). This contributes to make treatment very difficult, because the psychological effects of drug intake and optimal experience show several similarities. Besides substance-related variations, drugs induce the perception of a merging between individual and situation, deep involvement, isolation from the surrounding world, and psychophysical well-being.

In order to empirically assess similarities and differences between the two conditions, we conducted a study with FQ among addicts undergoing treatment with substitute substances (such as methadone) and ex-addicts living in detoxification communities (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003b). All the participants reported optimal experiences in their lives, and associated it with different activities. Work, learning tasks, structured leisure, and drug intake were the most frequent answers.

The comparison of the psychological features of optimal experience during drug intake, and during other activities draw interesting results. As expected, the two conditions shared high levels of involvement, concentration, enjoyment, excitement, and perceived skills. However, significant differences were detected in the values of other variables: after drug intake participants reported lower levels of perceived challenges, control of the situation, intrinsic motivation, relaxation, goal pursuit and control of the situation. These differences can be primarily related to the passive nature of the experience arising after drug intake. Individuals are neither solicited to find challenges to be faced with personal skills, nor can they perceive control of the situation, since they cannot influence the quality and duration of the substance’s effects, as well as the ensuing negative consequences. Addicts do not feel relaxed or intrinsically motivated during drug intake, since they need substances to avoid organic and mental withdrawal symptoms, and to get relief from craving symptoms. Finally, as concerns goals, the only aim of addicts is to passively experience drug effects, and to find ways to get the substance as soon as they need it. On the contrary, the other activities associated by the participants with optimal experience – mainly productive and leisure activities - were related to the perception of high challenges. Through them participants could express their creativity, and make the situation more stimulating or less demanding according to their perceived control, thus attaining a balance between challenges of the task and

personal skills. During optimal experience, these activities were intentionally sought after for their own sake, independently of external constraints or rewards. Relaxation was reported by virtue of the enjoyment in performing the activity without strong concern for extrinsic results and outcomes. Finally, participants perceived clear goals, thanks to the clear rules and structure characterizing the task.

These results suggest that drug induces mimetic or pseudo-optimal experiences, deceiving consciousness with an ephemeral perception of well-being, though followed by negative long-term consequences. From this perspective, it is not surprising that addicts centre their life upon drug, investing their resources in searching and using it as vehicle of rewarding and positive feelings.

However, while optimal experience promotes personal growth and skill development in the long run, drug intake has negative long-term consequences, leading to organic and mental disorders, and marginalization. At the biological level, addiction undermines health and physical performance, causing dependence, tolerance, as well as serious pathologies in the advanced stage of intoxication. At the social level, addicts gradually narrow their range of opportunities for action within a vicious circle: obtaining drug, taking it, enjoying its psychological benefits, experiencing craving and negative after-effects, searching for drug again. To get drug they engage in illegal activities and anti-social behaviors, thus undergoing marginalization and withdrawal from social roles. At the developmental level, the onset of pseudo-optimal experience, directly depending on substance intake, prevents individuals from the creative search for more complex environmental challenges. Addiction brings about a global deterioration in life style, a decrease in motivation to make plans and develop competencies (Olievenstein, 2000). It produces psychic entropy and disengagement, at the same time reducing behavioral complexity (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003b).

What about meaning? Perceived lack of meaning in life is quoted as one of the reasons to start taking drugs. Treatment programs aim at the reconstruction of a new personal identity, through the engagement of ex-addicts in socially meaningful activities, that provide them with opportunities for integration and participation (Cunningham, 1999; Downey, Rosengren, & Donovan, 2001). From this perspective, the association of these activities with optimal experience can promote the match between the cultural meaningfulness of these activities, and the individual meaning-making process.

Concluding Remarks

Psychological selection is a ceaseless process that shapes an individual's life. Its consequences however are not limited to the person herself: individuals learn and transmit information to others. Therefore each person contributes to the long-term shaping of her community and culture. Daily life is the best condition for analyzing psychological selection at work, and the quality of experience people

associate with daily situations represents the key information for investigating this process and its moment-by-moment outcomes.

In particular, optimal experience plays an important role in this process. Activities associated with it can be cultivated, through the search for higher challenges, the refinement of personal abilities, the achievement of higher levels of order and complexity in behavior (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Delle Fave & Bassi, 2000). At the individual level, these activities can become sources of meaning and can support identity building.

The opposite is also possible: the exposure to a context providing meanings and values can promote the individual's commitment to these meanings through the preferential cultivation of activities and behaviors connected to them. From this perspective, optimal experience plays a twofold role: it supports the preferential replication of the associated activities throughout the individual life span, at the same time promoting the survival and spreading of such activities within the culture.

People who find opportunities for engagement, self-expression and intrinsic reward in a specific domain --be it art, science, sport, manual work-- can bring these opportunities to the attention of others. However, the life of both an individual and a community is a whole. It cannot be divided into domains sealed off from each other, some of them associated with optimal experiences and positive outcomes, and some not. Individuals are responsible for the building of their own future and for the future of society with their whole behaviour. This is the reason why we need to consider meaning making as a core dimension around which identity and psychological selection develop. Optimal experience is a very powerful instrument to support this process. It can help individuals to channel their resources and refine their skills. It facilitates the engagement in meaningful activities through effortless concentration and intrinsic motivation. Therefore, any intervention to promote well-being of individuals and groups should aim at providing both opportunities for optimal experience, and awareness of their individual and collective meaning.

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