



A Pioneer in Mixed-Method Studies of Well-Being Across Cultures

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I am presently working as a professor of psychology at the Medical School of the University of Milano, the Italian city where I was born and spent most part of my life. I received my high school diploma in classical studies in 1979; the study of ancient cultures, history and philosophy awakened my curiosity about human mind as the source of ideas, theories, and culture as a whole. Therefore, I decided to join the Medical School of the University of Milano, with the intention of specializing in either neurology or psychiatry.

During my college years I attended optional courses in psychology at the Institute of Psychology of the Medical School. There I met Fausto Massimini, who was working at the theory of psychological selection through conceptual models and field studies in different cultures. I joined his research group, learning research techniques that I had the opportunity to apply in field studies in Europe and Americas. In those years, I also

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met Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who visited our Institute to start a collaborative project with Fausto Massimini, combining the theories of flow experience and psychological selection. As a natural consequence, I found myself engaged in the study of flow and daily experience fluctuations.

After the MD degree I attended a specialization course in clinical psychology, but research was my major interest. In 1992, I got a position of assistant professor at IULM University, an institution offering courses in humanities, languages and communication studies. This academic environment allowed me to deepen my knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity. At the same time, I continued to work with Fausto Massimini, developing models to study experience fluctuation patterns, and investigating flow across countries. We built the largest international data set on flow, collecting data in four continents and among the most diverse people: mountain shepherds, farmers, mathematicians, teachers, dancers and musicians, monks and nuns, persons with mental and physical disabilities, and persons experiencing marginalization such as street children, homeless people and illegal migrants.

These studies shed light on the psychological structure of flow, and on the features of the associated activities. Overall, findings highlighted that flow experience is not value laden, rather representing a specific configuration of psychological variables. As a consequence, its positive or negative outcomes are related to the individual and social meanings embedded in the associated activities. Moving from these findings, I started exploring the role of meaning-making in the preferential cultivation of specific flow activities, and in the process of psychological selection as a whole. Moreover, a three-year experience as scientific supervisor of cooperation programs addressed to street children and people with disabilities in Nepal arose my interest in well-being and mental health promotion in suboptimal health conditions. In 2001, a position of associate professor at the Medical School of the University of Milano allowed me to fulfill this interest through the collaboration with clinicians and patient associations.

The starting of the new millennium was crucially important for well-being studies. In 2000, a special issue of the *American Psychologist* officially launched positive psychology; the subsequent foundation of the European Network of Positive Psychology (ENPP) and the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) gave impulse to research and intervention programs aimed at promoting well-being. The *Journal of Happiness Studies* and the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, together with books and book series, complemented the already well-established literature on quality of life through their specific focus on the psychological constituents of well-being. I had the privilege to take active part in the expansion of positive psychology by serving as president of ENPP from 2006 to 2010, and as president of IPPA in 2009–2011. In 2010 I was appointed as Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

Two decades of fieldwork and cultural encounters, however, allowed me to notice that well-being theories and models were grounded in the western view of human functioning. For example, measures were designed in western labs and potentially relevant inputs from non-western models could not reach visibility due to constraints related to language, human resources and financial costs. In addition, after a long experience with qualitative studies, I was aware of the potential discrepancies between scientific theories and lay people views. To investigate these issues, with a group of willful colleagues from different countries we launched a project based on a mixed-method, bottom-up approach, the Eudaimonic and Hedonic Happiness Investigation

(EHHI). The project was started in 2007, and the first results were published in 2011 in *Social Indicators Research*. A dimension of well-being substantially missing in scientific research emerged from the data: inner harmony and balance, reported as the most frequent definition of happiness across countries. The EHHI project was also designed to combine the study of happiness with the exploration of meaning-making and goal setting, with the aim to understand their interrelations. The project is still growing and more countries are getting represented in the team; the EHHI instrument has been also used locally with specific populations. In Italy we are collecting data among persons with chronic diseases and their family caregivers.

Overall, my life and work experience taught me what John Donne beautifully stated in the seventeenth century: no man is an island, entire of itself. So many aspects of positive human functioning are still largely unexplored. A stronger collaboration among researchers representing the different souls and cultural views of the well-being and quality of life domain could definitely help shed light on them.