

The Hope Circuit: A Psychologist's Journey from Helplessness to Optimism

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BOOK REVIEW

The Hope Circuit: A Psychologist's Journey from Helplessness to Optimism, by Martin Seligman, London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2018, 448 pp., £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781473691636

The symposium on Happiness and Wellbeing will be incomplete without a mention of Martin (Marty) Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology and Director of the Penn Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, USA. In a timely coincidence for us, he recently published his autobiography, which we review here.

Yet, to call the Hope Circuit an autobiography is to mislead. It is an edifying and compelling narrative of the dynamic cascade of events, people, and ideas that transmogrified Marty Seligman and the profession of psychology in tandem. It gives you an inside view of the making of psychology across the time period in which Seligman has been active professionally, which is from the 1960s (Seligman as a student at Princeton) till date. Although Seligman is the protagonist, the dialogical style that he adopts to portray his strikingly collaborative life allows the reader to vicariously participate in the thought processes of three generations of (eminent) psychologists/scholars in this time period: Seligman and his peers (e.g. Steve Maier, Chris Peterson, Judith Rodin, Carl Sagan, Ed Diener), his mentors/seniors (e.g. Aaron Beck, Richard L. Solomon, Joe Wolpe) and his students/progeny (e.g. Lynne Abramson, Alejandro Braun Adler, Angela Duckworth, Suzanne B. Johnson, Tayyab Rashid). Discussions relating to atomism and rigour vs. realism/reality and relevance, heritability vs. environmental radicalism, behaviourism vs. cognition and consciousness/mental life, reinforcement vs. intentionality and will, basic/natural science vs. applied social and clinical science, experimental psychology vs. clinical practice, hard sciences vs. soft sciences, testing theories vs. relieving suffering, and their outcomes enliven the book and invigorate the reader.

Spanning almost six decades, multiple countries, and a diversity of scholars, Seligman presents the positions, counter-positions, clarifications, criticisms and redressals of criticisms, debated and reflected ideas, as also the epiphanies and intuitive leaps forward, that together comprise the conception, gestation, birthing, and nurturing of a new paradigm, that of Positive Psychology. At various points in the book, Seligman describes himself as depressive and a pessimist, self-absorbed and negative. Almost two decades of his career were focused on helplessness, depression and pessimism. As late as in 1988, he considered a question of "are you happy" stupid, and a life characterised by zero suffering as the epitome of success. And yet the power of the question lingered and he began to acknowledge to himself that there was a difference between "spending my life correcting what was wrong" vs. "spending it building what was right" (p. 204), that "happiness is more than the absence of unhappiness" (p. 206). It followed for him that, "(t)here was more to research, more to therapy, and more to theory than just misery and its relief" (p. 206). In January 1998, he spent a week with his wife Mandy Seligman, Mihaly and Isabella Csikszentmihalyi, and Ray and Sandy Fowler, "inventing" Positive Psychology, that is, drawing out a game plan for founding Positive Psychology. This plan was actualised by the end of 1999 with funds from Gallup, the Templeton Foundation, and Atlantic Philanthropies, and collaboration with many such as Ed Diener, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Chris Peterson, and George Vaillant. As the scientific study of optimal human functioning focused on identifying and promoting thriving in individuals and contexts, Positive Psychology includes work on optimism, character strengths, flow, and subjective well-being. Seligman also describes his PERMA theory of well-being: *positive* emotion, *engagement*, *relationships*, *meaning*, and *accomplishment*.

Like the Selective Optimisation and Compensation (SOC) theory is one concrete exemplar of life span theory, so the theory of learned optimism is exemplary of Positive Psychology. As indicated in

the title, the book simultaneously chronicles Seligman's journey from co-developing a theory of learned helplessness to co-developing a theory of learned optimism. What is remarkable is that the turnaround is not just in belief or conceptualisation, neither is it overnight. The turnaround takes a lifetime of work, but not in linear fashion. In its culmination, it is based on the rigor of neuroscience accompanied with an intuitive leap. Pessimism and helplessness, he found (courtesy Steve Maier), were not learnt after all. Instead, pessimism and helplessness are vestigial evolutionary responses that are readily available: in a sense default mammalian reactions to continued threat or stress, entailing the activation of the dorsal raphe nucleus (DRN) located in the midbrain and pons. What is learnt is optimism! Default passivity can be overridden by learning located in the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) – a hope circuit in the brain, an adaptation (as Seligman puts it) to more recent evolutionary history!


A concern that dogged him and gnawed at him throughout his career and shaped his actions was that of external validity: in other words, the application and relevance of his work and that of research in general to real life problems and settings. Early in his career he questions: "Hundreds of professors of psychology make their livings teaching 'scientific' method and statistics, the trappings of internal validity, but no one makes a living teaching about external validity" (p. 79). Even when he had become a renowned experimental psychologist he "believed that scientific psychology is meaningful only if it applies to human problems" (p. 181). Not surprisingly therefore, a substantial quantum of Seligman's work involves applications to real world problems and contexts, including applications to therapy, prevention, education, careers, health, insurance, sports, and wellbeing of soldiers. The internationalisation of his applications was overseen by Seligman and/or his colleagues in countries such as Australia, Bhutan, India, Mexico, Peru, and the UK.

With multi-layered depth, the book has something valuable for any person who reads it, regardless of their academic background, gender, culture, or interest. At both personal and professional levels, we were struck, for example, by Seligman's approach to criticism. "It is much better to be criticized than to be ignored" (p. 276), he said. He believes that criticism is crucial to progress in science. When his work was challenged, he "tried not to get defensive. I acknowledged my shortcoming in print ... I tried to work with my critics, not against them" (p.154). Collaborating with one of his critics, John Teasdale (1976–1979), led him to rebuild his helplessness theory of depression to include interpretation of meaning of events/cause of helplessness as personal, permanent and pervasive (amounting to pessimism), as opposed to external, transient, and specific (which later he identified as optimism).

We would like to conclude our review by sharing another of Seligman's insights that illustrates his incisiveness, creativity and contribution: "We continually imagine different futures, we evaluate them, we choose among them" (p. 66); "human action is drawn by the future and influenced, not driven, by the past" (p. 353).

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