

Book Review

The hope circuit. A psychologist's journey from helplessness to optimism

Seligman M. (2018). **The hope circuit. A psychologist's journey from helplessness to optimism.** Sydney: Penguin Random. pp. 432. Aust\$34.99.

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This book is made up of five sections and 29 chapters. The sections are headed Beginnings, Becoming (1967–1983), Being (1988–2004), Flourishing (2002–2017) and Looking into the future (2008–to date).

At the time of writing his biography, Seligman was the Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and Director of the Positive Psychology Center. To many readers of Children Australia, Seligman may be best known for his co-authored book 'Learned Helplessness' published in (1995), a theory he has long since left behind.

The professional journey from the 'theory of helplessness' to his key role in the development of positive psychology is the inspiring story told in 'The Hope Circuit', with its subtitle of 'A psychologist's journey from helplessness to optimism'.

Although this book is about Seligman's life, it is not a conventional biography. You do learn about Seligman's personal life, but more importantly, you learn about his professional life. Firstly, as an experimental psychologist with an academic PhD, then as clinical psychologist concerned with mental disorders and illness and, finally, as the founder of positive psychology with the focus on personal well-being and the role of optimism. In the course of this journey, he examines the major theoretical frameworks that found favour in psychology at various points in time (i.e., Freudian theory and behaviourism) and the paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962) that led to changes in psychological thinking and theory. In telling this story, he also gives an account of his many engagements with key figures in psychology (e.g., Skinner) during his life time.

As you read, you embark on the insider's story about American psychology and the trial and tribulations of the American Psychological Association (APA) that Seligman, somewhat to his surprise, became President of in 1995. During his term of office, he promoted a move by the Association to become a body concerned not solely with scientific research but also towards a more person-focused psychology that also addresses mental health issues and treatment.

In the Flourishing section of the book, there is a somewhat astonishing account of the substantial work that Seligman undertook teaching US army personnel about resilience and positive psychology. It describes the way that, because of this involvement, anti-war activists sought to harm his scholarly standing.

The account of his 6-month sabbatical in 2007 that he spent in Australia at Geelong Grammar School is most informative. There is a detailed account of how this sabbatical came about and how, together with a group of graduate students, the entire staff of the school were trained in 'positive education'. Other schools have followed suit (Green, Oades, & Robinson, 2011). Today, it is possible to gain a Master's degree in Positive Education at the University of Melbourne. There is also the Positive Psychology Institute in Sydney (www.positivepsychologyinstitute.com.au) and the Positive Education Schools Association (www.pesa.edu.au).

Altogether, Seligman has made an amazing contribution to psychological thinking and theory that has wide implication for a range of disciplines, not just psychology.

A book worthy of reading.

References

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