

‘Just clicks’: an interpretive phenomenological analysis of professional dancers’ experience of flow

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The subjective experience of flow in professional dancers was analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Flow is believed to be a psychological state in which the mind and body ‘just click’, creating optimal performance. Unfortunately, sport and performance research have severely neglected reviewing the flow experience in dancers, leading to a significant gap in dance psychology literature. Nine professional dancers, male and female, specializing in ballet, contemporary, jazz, Irish and Canadian dance were interviewed using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The results recovered three main higher order themes consistent with Csikszentmihalyi (1975): the autotelic experience, challenge vs. skill and absorption in the task. In addition to gaining insight into the experience of flow in dancers, the results showed that dance has its own unique facilitators and inhibitors of flow. The results offer choreographers, artistic directors and dancers information regarding the importance of environmental, social and physical elements of the dance world, thus enabling them to manipulate factors, whenever applicable, to enhance the flow experience.

To become the principal dancer of a company takes a lot of practice, hard work and talent. Dancers, runners and even mathematicians have consistently reported entering a calm state of being, or a ‘zone’, while executing their greatest performances and personal bests. This psychological state (‘zone’) that can create optimal performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1982, 1990, 1997), is defined as ‘flow’. Assuming that champions and principal dancers experience flow during their best performances (Kimiecik & Stein, 1992), surely it is imperative that choreographers and dance companies learn how to facilitate their students in reaching this ‘zone’ of optimal functioning.

Flow experience has been researched in many domains, yet I found a paucity of literature relevant to professional dancers. This scarcity of research is the reason for

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the present study, giving psychologists and readers the opportunity to understand the experience of flow from dance expert authority. In addition, this study attempts to specify common and unique facilitators and inhibitors of the flow experience in professional dance from the perspective of the dance expert. Dancers were therefore questioned on their flow experiences, demonstrating key themes and unique inhibitors/facilitators of the phenomenon of flow.

For this study, I decided to employ the phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research has enabled today's society to reach beyond the quantitative restraints of past psychological research. Thus, instead of merely stating that a phenomenon occurs, phenomenology and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) have ventured forward to discover exactly how it feels to experience the phenomenon itself. The drive to discover the deeper meaning of an experience is the force behind this study.

Before establishing the importance of the flow experience in dance education, I would like to briefly review the history behind flow and optimal experience. The notion of transcendence and enlightenment through an activity has long had its roots in philosophy and early humanistic psychology. Transcendent experiences, or peak experiences, were first explored by psychologist/philosopher, Abraham Maslow. During these 'peak experiences', the person would experience an 'integration and unification of the world as a whole' (Maslow, 1994, p. 59). In addition to this, the person would fall into a highly concentrative state, free of self-consciousness, ego, time, negativity, fearlessness and controllability. Maslow (1994) believed that when a person underwent a peak experience, they gained 'insights and revelations' (p. 75) which created a sense of euphoria. By participating in activities that created peak experiences, a person was able to motivate themselves to reach 'self actualization', simply for pure intrinsic reward and enjoyment of the experience (Maslow, 1994).

Enjoyment and intrinsic motivation are the forefront requirements in Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) theory of flow. These key elements create what was concluded to be the 'autotelic' experience. In general, the autotelic experience is 'a psychological state, based on concrete feedback, which acts as a reward in that it produces continuing behavior in the absence of other rewards' (p. 21). Thus, they found that people engaged in certain activities (autotelic activities) for the sheer enjoyment of the experience. In addition, participants in Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) study rated the intrinsic enjoyment of the activity far more rewarding than the extrinsic rewards of the chosen activity (p. 14). In addition to autotelic experiences, there is also an autotelic personality. This personality is said to be more attracted to activities that enhance the likelihood of an autotelic experience.

The term 'flow' was eventually coined to describe the autotelic experience:

A dynamic state—the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement...he experiences {the action} as a unified flowing from one movement to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and the environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present and future. (p. 36)

Though numerous activities have the potential to elicit the flow experience, a person needs to be involved and feel intrinsically rewarded by their participation in order to achieve the flow experience. Nine main elements to the flow experience were found. First of all, for flow to occur, the experience must be enjoyable. After enjoyment of the activity has been established, the activity must create a balance between challenge and skill level. Thus, when an activity is too challenging for the participant, it renders itself 'meaningless' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 50). If people do not know the rules to a game or are unequipped to complete a task, flow is unable to occur. The same principal applies to over-qualified participants. If a person is participating in a sport below their skill level, they are most likely to become bored of the game, due to a lack of challenge and opportunity to develop: 'enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when challenges are just balanced with the person's capability to act' (p. 52).

Once an activity has been deemed as enjoyable and equal to a person's skill level, the next element of the flow experience occurs: total absorption in the task. This enables the participant to concentrate solely on task relevant stimuli and block out all other unimportant distracters: 'People become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing' (p. 53). Ultimately, a person's ability to become completely involved in an activity is due to the existence of pre-set goals and immediate feedback. For example, a dancer has clear goals about the dance they are about to perform and receives immediate feedback from their movements, the other dancers on stage and the music, which signal to themselves that they are performing correctly.

Concentration on the task at hand is another element of the flow experience. While a person is concentrated on the activity, they are free from the worries of daily life. Thus, if the mind is free from worrying thoughts of jobs, family, money, etc, then it is free to create the flow experience. In addition to the banishment of worries and fears, people who experience flow report a heightened sense of control over their situation, or 'lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life' (p. 59).

Pairing this worry-free, controllable state with a heightened sense of enjoyment is likely to result in a loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This is when the person, involved in the activity, loses their idea of self and blends in with the environment or the activity they are completing. For example, a dancer on stage will lose their ability to separate themselves from the dance, 'becoming one flesh' (p. 63). When someone is too preoccupied with themselves, analyzing their movements, there is no room for flow to occur. In contrast when someone is in flow, there is no psychic energy available to criticize, fear or analyze the 'self'. Finally, flow enables the participant to experience a 'transformation of time'. It is during flow that time is warped into different speeds than in everyday life: 'during the flow experience, the sense of time bears little relation to the passage of time as measured by the absolute convention of the clock' (p. 66). Thus, minutes can seem like hours and hours can feel like seconds.

Research on flow soon moved from everyday activities to athletics and sport performance. Jackson's (1992) research on elite figure skaters used an in-depth qualitative interview to measure the existence and experience of flow. Sixteen national champion figure skaters were interviewed using semi-structured interviews about the experience of flow, the antecedents of flow and the inhibitors of flow. Jackson (1992) found that there were nine higher order themes that matched Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) themes of flow. Jackson's (1992) research was limited however, due to the fact that the results reflected only one type of sport, figure skating. Jackson suggested that future researchers should branch out and focus on other sport domains.

As a former professional dancer, I specifically chose to analyze dance because of the lack of research within the area of flow. In addition, I believed that dance would be a perfect area in which to study the flow experience due to the fact that dance 'has rules that require learning a skill, it sets up goals, provides feedback and makes control possible' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 72). I was aware that dance had the potential to enable a person to become concentrated in the activity, and the emotions associated with the activity, which could then enhance a loss of self-consciousness and time, creating complete absorption in the moment. Moreover, dance is often an enjoyable experience for both the participant and the observer. Dance has been described as a mimicry activity that 'makes us feel more than what we are through fantasy, pretense and disguise' (Sheets, 1966, as cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 73). Mimicry activities are those that allow the participant to escape 'reality' and create an alternative world for themselves. Thus, the dancer has the potential to become someone or something different, learning and developing their expertise. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that flow-enhancing activities were those that 'provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality' (p. 74). Thus, assuming that dance is a mimicry activity, dancers are likely to be prime examples of subjects that should experience flow on a continuous basis. The dancer's drive for perfection and challenge creates the perfect environment in which to study flow.

There is great difficulty, however, in recording the phenomenon of flow in dance. This phenomenological problem has been attributed to the dynamic nature of dance. Therefore, an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the experience of flow in dancers will be used. IPA is described as 'exploring the lived experience' (Reid *et al.*, 2005, p. 20). This type of research utilizes the participants themselves as experts in the chosen phenomenon being analyzed. In its entirety, IPA is inductive in nature, with no pre-existing hypothesis, 'IPA aims to capture and explore the meanings that participants assign to their experiences' (Reid *et al.*, 2005, p. 20). IPA participants are chosen because of their expertise in the subject matter and they participate in in-depth semi-structured interviews to learn about their thoughts and the meanings they derive from the experience [of flow]. The analysis interprets the transcripts individually and then compares each to the experiences of others in the study. Reid *et al.* (2005) stated that a proper IPA is: 'Interpretive [thus subjective; transparent (grounded in example from the data)] and plausible (to participants, co-analysts, supervisors and the general reader)' (p. 20).

Aims and Purposes

The purpose of this study is to establish the existence and the extent of the experience of flow in professional dancers. In addition to reporting the nature of the flow experience among dancers, the second aim of the study was to determine and propose environmental conditions that can enhance or inhibit the occurrence of flow.

With other researchers, I have come to believe that it is as equally important to investigate the positive experiences in performance/sport as to investigate the negative. However, I found it extremely difficult to find research specifically and independently aimed at the flow experience in dancers. If it is the nature of the performance/sport that elicits the occurrence of flow, such as activities involving a 'blend of performing and competitive aspects, creativity, flowing movements, and continuity of movement' (Jackson, 1992, p. 165), then dance is likely to elicit the flow experience.

Dance is a vital component of cultural identity and yet it has been neglected in flow experience studies. This study aims to broaden the path for future psychological investigation into dance and hopefully aid teachers and dancers in their pursuit of excellence. This study is important because by exploring the existence and quality of flow in professional dancers, identifying the main components of the experience, the antecedents and inhibitors of flow, it should enable teachers, coaches and athletes to create a 'flow friendly' environment in which the probability of the occurrence of flow, and optimal performance, is increased.

Method

Design

I decided to use IPA to record the in-depth experience of flow in professional dancers. IPA is a phenomenological account of an experience that is 'concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself' (Smith *et al.*, 1999, p. 218). Thus, this type of analysis allowed me to determine the richness of the flow experience and the extent to which it is similar or different for each and every dancer. IPA has been used in numerous studies as it is 'a method that analyses data in an idiographic manner and which aims to explore the participants' experiences, cognitions and meaning makings' (Milton, 2004a, p. 118). However, the process of IPA is not steadfast as it is subject to the interpretation and information the researcher transmits to the text (Smith *et al.*, 1999). It must be noted that I realized from the onset of the study that although I could attempt to retrieve the 'insider's view', I could never completely achieve this due to my own interpretive biases.

Although IPA has been predominantly used within health psychology, it is now expanding to new domains. Areas that are opening up to the usefulness of IPA are within 'personal and cultural identity; reproductive decision-making and adoption; eating disorders; spirituality and quality of life' (Reid *et al.*, p. 21). Dance researchers have also adopted this method of analysis to get to the depths of the dancer's experience (Bracey, 2004).

Participants and Procedure

Nine elite, professional dancers were contacted through email and phone to participate in the study. These dancers were either freelance dancers, part of the Scottish Ballet, the Curve Foundation or Riverdance. The group consisted of five female and four male dancers ranging in professional experience from 10 to 25 years. The age of the dancers ranged from 25 to 45. All dancers had formal training in either ballet, jazz, contemporary, Irish or Canadian dance. Eight of the interviews were conducted at the studio where the dancers practised and/or performed. One interview was conducted by telephone due to unforeseen circumstances and distance complications. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour and a half.

To get an in-depth interpretation of the dancers' subjective thoughts about what it is like to experience flow, I used a semi-structured interview format that included a limited amount of open-ended questions (Appendix 1). An example of the type of question asked is: 'What events, either environmental or physical, led to the occurrence of your flow experience?' Once it was established that the dancer was familiar with the term 'flow', and had agreed that they had indeed experienced the state of flow, they were then asked to remember their last vivid optimal experience (flow experience) 'one in which you were totally absorbed in what you were doing, and which was enjoyable' (Martin & Cutler, 2002, p. 346). The next part of the interview focused on what they perceived the facilitators and inhibitors of flow to be. I recorded the information provided by the participants by using tape recording equipment and personalized notes.

Analytical Strategy*Process of interpretation*

Stage 1. To commence, I transcribed the interviews of each dancer, verbatim, including my questions and comments. The goal of the transcription was to learn about the dancer's subjective experience of flow. Smith *et al.*'s (1999) guidelines for IPA analysis were used, following the case study approach. The dancers were treated as case studies due to the small amount of participants ($n < 9$). To commence the interpretation process, I read the first transcript, numerous times, to fully acquaint myself with the text. Due to the interpretive nature of the analysis, I recorded any quotes that I considered interesting and relevant to the description of the experience of flow. These were then coded into six main themes. Quotes were highlighted to support the theme's rationale.

The next step, according to IPA, was to compile the themes and discover connections between them. From the list, I began to cluster the minor themes into major themes. Smith *et al.* (1999) believed that this section of IPA was the most intense part for the researcher as it created 'a close interaction between you and the text...drawing on your own interpretive resources' (Smith *et al.*, 1999, p. 223).

Finally, I created a 'master list' from the previous compilation of themes. This process involved carefully identifying higher order themes and eliminating

non-relevant or 'sub themes' that were not as prevalent throughout the text. As a result of this process, three main themes of the experience of flow emerged.

Stage 2. The next part of the analysis was to begin coding the remaining interview transcripts. Smith *et al.* (1999) suggested two ways in which the interviewer could code the remaining individual transcripts. I chose to use the 'master theme list' as a guideline to begin analyzing the subsequent transcripts. This method was preferable for my purposes because it enabled me to find connections between the transcripts as well as novel and contradictory experiences: 'by remaining aware of what had come before it was possible to identify what was new and different in the subsequent transcripts and at the same time to find responses which further articulated the extant themes' (Smith *et al.*, 1999, p. 225).

Stage 3. The final part of the IPA was to create a group 'master list' of themes. During this section, I was required to select the predominant higher order themes. This particular analysis, of nine professional dancers, provided three higher order themes.

Validity

Validity for IPA cannot be attained simply through traditional quantitative or qualitative methods (Vignoles *et al.*, 2004). IPA is founded around the belief that it is impossible to understand fully our participants' world due to the inevitable biases and interpretation of their experience (Willig, 2001). In order to reinforce internal validity, I randomly re-contacted specific dancers to double check (member check) whether or not I had interpreted their quotations correctly. In addition to member checking, I employed a colleague, who is an accomplished professional dancer and well educated in qualitative research, to review my proposed themes with their matching quotations in order to conventionally triangulate my results.

Ultimately, the validity of this study is entrenched in the examples I used to demonstrate my interpretations of the experience of flow: 'validity is established by the persuasiveness by grounding examples which is applied through an inspection of interpretation (rather than firm conclusions) and data' (Milton, 2004b, p. 287).

Results and Discussion

Three main themes emerged from the analysis with regard to the dancers' interpretation of the flow experience. These three themes were discovered previously through Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1988, 1990) and then Jackson's (1992, 1996) research into flow. However, the remaining six elements of flow, discovered by Csikszentmihalyi, were not as prevalent throughout the transcripts. Csikszentmihalyi's autotelic experience, challenge vs. skill and absorption in the task were the

dominant themes in the dancer's transcripts. The following section outlines the three higher order themes and presents evidence in the dancer's own words to support the results.

At the outset, the experience of being in flow was unanimously described as a moment where everything 'just clicks'.

Respondent A:

Everything was perfect; the weather, everything fell into place. It sounds funny and weird, but everything was right. My turns were dead on and the flexibility was there, you know? The heat in the place was hospitable and everyone was in awe of their own performance.

Enjoyment and the autotelic experience

The most prevalent theme interpreted by eight of the nine dancers was that they felt a surge of enjoyment when experiencing flow. The dancers believed that flow was, in itself, an autotelic experience. The dance was performed for the sheer enjoyment and reward of the dance. Overall, they felt external rewards were second to the feeling they got from dancing for themselves. The final question posed was 'Who do you dance for?' The majority of the participants (n=8) answered 'for themselves', suggesting that flow was an experience sought out simply for intrinsic enjoyment.

Respondent A:

I dance for myself first and then the audience second.

Respondent C:

It was enjoyable. Most of the performances we did were enjoyable and we knew the routines and we knew the parts and we enjoyed ourselves.

Respondent D:

You do this because you love it, and people are coming to appreciate it not to pick you apart or put you down. Fully accept yourself, and then you can express yourself fully.

Instilling intrinsic motivation within dancers is imperative for dance education. Not only does it make the dancer want to continue performing, it pushes them to return day after day to the gruelling practice sessions that will eventually propel their career and the reputation of the choreographer and dance company. Jackson (1996) found that the autotelic experience was the most 'salient dimension' of flow stated by elite athletes.

It is not simply sports that elicit the autotelic experience or flow experience. Martin and Cutler (2002) found that theatre actors who experienced regular flow states found the tasks to be more enjoyable and autotelic. In addition, the participants who experienced flow were highly intrinsically motivated, 'Subjects were highly motivated to participate in theatre because the experience of acting was stimulating and exciting and provided an opportunity to accomplish personal goals' (Martin & Cutler, 2002, p. 350). Thus, those who participated in theatre for the intrinsic enjoyment (autotelic

experience) were far more likely to experience flow than their extrinsically motivated peers.

Confidence in Self and Skills

The dancers perceived the flow experience to be a point in time where their abilities equalled the challenge presented. They described the experience of flow as being one in which confidence overtook their mental state, leaving no room for doubting their performance abilities. The experience of flow was one of pure belief in oneself, free from doubts, criticisms and negative mental thoughts. Collectively, the dancers perceived their ability to become confident was a by-product of repetitive rehearsals and situations that required high challenge and high skill.

Respondent A:

We were confident and the muscles were there and knew what they had to do.

Respondent E:

It is very important [confidence in your ability]. I need the skill and challenge balance. I experience flow when I encounter a sequence that I think I can't do and it is challenging and it brings me to a higher level. You see it as a challenge and your survival instincts kick and you ask yourself how did I do it? You need to be inspired by the challenge.

Respondent B:

Ok, ya, if you don't have the skill to meet the challenge, it increases a sense of struggle...and the fear factor 'cause they [choreographers] are looking for something specific that is not innate in you so the stress level goes up as you try and achieve that.

The dancers agreed that when a piece had become too familiar and repetitive or else was insignificant to the company as a whole, they were not able to reach their original flow state. They became too accustomed to the movements and music, that they became over-used to the piece, and the flow experience became harder to attain (high skill, low challenge). The following is a dancer's recollection of a piece that did not challenge their ability:

Respondent A:

Yes, I can feel detached from my dance because it has become too easy and some of them 'cause of background dancing, you know being insignificant. Being in the background, the challenge is not the same. You are filling space basically. That's so different, so you kinda lose interest and do the poses.

Anxiety and boredom (caused by low skill/high challenge and high skill/low challenge, respectively) are performance states that must be avoided if the experience of flow is to occur. Dance educators must be alert to their students' abilities in order to facilitate the flow experience. I found that the dancers repeatedly expressed that there was a fine line between the work being at skill level and being downright boring. While the choreographer's artistic vision should be respected, perhaps choreographers can try to engage more with their dancers in order to maximize their dancers' potential, possibly altering the routine once the dance is no longer challenging.

Kimiecik and Stein (1992) stated that these elements of sport are inhibitors of flow and decrease the overall performance of an elite athlete: 'The quality of an athlete's experience would be most optimal when in the flow state, least optimal when in a state of apathy and less than optimal when in anxious or bored states' (Kimiecik & Stein, 1992, p. 146). Jackson and Roberts (1992), as well as Jackson *et al.* (1998), found that 'conception of ability' was a primary predictor of peak performance (which Jackson believed was connected to flow). Participants who were self-referenced and perceived a balance between skill and challenges were more likely to reach flow. Gould *et al.* (2002) found that confidence in their ability was a common psychological characteristic of elite Olympic teams and solo athletes. Athletes who demonstrated high self-confidence were more likely to achieve superior performance and record experiencing flow (Gould *et al.*, 1999, 2002). Cohn's (1991) study of elite golfers supported the magnitude of perceived skill and challenge balance. Cohn recorded that when golfers achieved excellence and flow-like states, they were confident in their 'ability to win, ability to play well, ability to hit targets and their thoughts of being a better player' (Cohn, 1991, p. 4).

Absorption in the Task

Unanimously, all dancers reported that they felt a 'loss of consciousness' when they were experiencing flow. They described this state as being in their own 'bubble' in which everything, including their sense of self, faded into the background leaving only the dance itself. In this loss of self-consciousness came a distortion of time. Dancers reported that while they were experiencing flow, time seemed to either slow down, increase or not exist at all. In addition to time distortion, complete concentration, intense focus and elimination of all thought occurred. The dancers were so focused on the task at hand that there was no room left for any task irrelevant stimuli or thoughts.

Respondent A:

It's a big empty. Whatever happened during the day, whatever is happening before is GONE. It's totally the music, the steps, myself. It's like being in your own bubble. You see the people in front and all those people, but you are in your own bubble, you are doing whatever you want to do...what you have been taught to do, what you are supposed to do and you are having a blast with it. You are in your totally secure world of freedom...totally free...when it's right, your guts are spilling out...all the jitters and the worries...everything is there...but it's good...the bubble is your world...when you are in it, you are great, you don't think about it.

Respondent B:

Mentally I don't really know; I just get carried away. I don't realize what I'm doing. I'm doing it but I'm so in the moment, but I don't have any consciousness around me, of anyone else.

Respondent D:

Ummm, just pure enjoyment really; like expressing how you feel right at that moment. I couldn't say that I am conscious of my thoughts. I am just enjoying the purity of the movement and how it felt for me. That's how I am sensitive towards that; you are completely comfortable with yourself

and relaxed and open to your body and how you approach the movement, then I find that I get to that place.

Concentrated attention and intense focus have been mentioned repeatedly as key elements to the flow phenomenon and peak performance. Dancers, in particular, have a very difficult job of performing constantly in front of large audiences, audition and review boards. These environments can create multiple opportunities for losing concentration and focusing on task irrelevant stimuli. Dance educators can create programs for their students (imagery, meditation, relaxation) that allow the dancer to focus on task relevant stimuli, ignore irrelevant/detrimental input and thus experience flow.

Cohn (1991) found that when golfers performed their finest shots, they reported an absence of consciousness. Privette's (1981) studies produced numerous accounts of the flow experience in professional athletes. Unanimously they described the flow experience as being a point in time when 'attention and energies were channelled in a single direction' (Privette, 1981, p. 34). This intense concentration into a single focus created an environment that eliminated task irrelevant stimuli, negative self-talk and anxiety. Cohn (1991) found that when an elite athlete narrowly focused on one specific goal, there was a significant decline of distractions and an increased positive environment that could facilitate the flow experience.

Influences on the Occurrence of Flow

The second aim of the study was to identify the unique and commonly perceived facilitators and inhibitors of flow in dance. Since there has been a limited amount of detailed, in-depth analysis of the experience of flow in professional dance, it was thought to be valuable to dancers, choreographers and artistic directors to identify these factors in order to facilitate their creation of 'flow friendly' environments.

Confidence

Overall, confidence was perceived to be the predominant facilitator of flow. Dancers who consistently experienced flow on stage reported that they would never go on stage without being confident in their ability to perform the sequence. Confidence was achieved by extensive rehearsal, dedication, commitment and clear goals identified before going on stage.

Respondent C:

Yes, you have to be confident, and you have to sell yourself. I am selling my body and the dance to the audience; I need to make this interesting for them. Like selling a mobile, I need to be confident with the dance and my character on stage.

Respondent B:

Ya, but its more about confidence, more than anything. 'cause if you haven't done a piece and they say 'right you're doing the piece now' your confidence would be like 'I can't do this, I haven't done it for ages' whereas really you can't 'cause it isn't about technique, it's about your intention.

Instilling confidence in their students is an important priority for dance teachers. Jackson (1992) found that confidence was a major contributor to flow occurrence, falling under the higher order theme of positive mental attitude. Confidence was documented as one of the most frequently espoused themes in the study. Catley and Duda (1997) reported that pre-performance readiness (confidence) was a vital precedent to the experience of flow, 'Confident readiness appeared to have the strongest relationship to flow' (p. 307).

Music and choreography

Music as well as the choreography were perceived to be vital factors in enhancing the flow experience. Making a connection with the music and being comfortable with the choreography enhanced the occurrence and intensity of flow for every dancer interviewed. Dancers unanimously agreed that choreography that did not work with their natural body shape or movements inhibited their ability to get into flow.

Respondent B:

It's the relationship between the music and the dance put together. It's not just whether the music's right or the dance is right. I think for each individual it depends. For me, that time, and that music and moment really went together for me. I really felt it, but to someone else, it probably didn't. Um, it just depends. There is another piece we do that is all structured, all technique and the music is detached from the dance and that is a hard piece to get 'cause you have to be really focused otherwise everything falls to bits but 'cause you are so focused on the movement, you don't get adrenaline...It's a different kind of zone.

Respondent A:

The music and choreography is very, very important. If you have a good piece of music with a boring choreography...then you will not perform as well. Choreography that challenges you too much is not good either, 'cause if there is a choreographer who is creating a piece, he will create it for the level of the company, so if he asks for triple quadruple and you can only do a triple, then he must adapt to your level. And that's what a good choreographer should know and do anyways...the music must also be always inspiring.

Respondent D:

If I am doing something really fast and it requires a huge amount of concentration I wouldn't get into flow. I am thinking about the counts, isolation, achieving the position, right place at the right time. If you have more space and time in the movement and music, I find that there is more of a chance to get into flow.

Pre-Performance Routine

All of the dancers interviewed had some form of ritualistic preparation associated with their perceived ability to get into flow on stage. A pre-performance routine served as a grounding mechanism to help alleviate anxiety and help the dancer focus on the task ahead of them. Dancers who missed the opportunity to participate in their pre-performance routine stated that their ability to experience flow was greatly reduced. Mechanisms for controlling anxiety during pre-performance routines were generally

relaxation techniques, breathing techniques, stretching and mentally rehearsing as well as thought stopping and positive talk.

Respondent C:

I would say for myself, 'cause we are all individual and we all act in our own way, that I need about half an hour before the show for relaxation. Even if the show is very technical with lots of pirouettes and very physical, some people need to be very hyper before the show, but I can't. I like to have quiet movements to get rid of the nerves.

Respondent B:

I have to make sure I eat. That is one ritual I have to do. If I don't eat I usually have a bad show.

This section reflects the need for dancers to establish a positive pre-performance environment. During the pre-performance routine, the dancer is creating a flow friendly environment that enables them to control anxiety and increase relaxation before the performance. Dance teachers and companies, in order to facilitate flow experiences, can host workshops that focus on teaching their students imagery, relaxation, meditation and proper stretching techniques.

Costumes and make-up

This theme emerged surprisingly, yet consistently, throughout the interview process. The dancers stated that costumes and make-up could seriously facilitate or inhibit the flow experience. The reason for facilitation was the notion of mimicry, mentioned previously. Costumes enabled the dancer to enter into an alternative state of reality, therefore eliminating fears and vulnerability as they took on a character on stage. Make-up operated as a mask which the dancer could 'hide behind' while on stage. In the same way that these extras could help the dancer, costumes, make-up and hair malfunctions could psychologically throw the dancer off and limit their possibilities of experiencing flow. A preoccupation with such distractions might be related to the persistent need for perfection on stage.

Respondent B:

Costumes help get into the zone. And make-up. I think it is the whole thing. That is what goes with dance. You are there to look the part, 'cause it is covering up who you are 'cause as a dancer you are putting on this kind of aura that you are this something else.

Respondent D:

Oh ya. If you can't get your hair right! You think I can't get this, or how long will this take? Definitely; some days you just look at yourself and think 'I did it all really wrong'. Costumes can absolutely get you into the role and the zone more. A small thing like the part in your hair can trigger insecurities and hinder your performance and flow experience.

Stage setting

Travelling and performing in unfamiliar settings was felt by the dancers to be detrimental to their ability to experience flow. To combat this, dancers agreed that

becoming as familiar as possible with the stage was essential for flow to occur. In addition, if their requirements for a good audience were met, they were able to achieve flow more readily.

Respondent G:

Yes definitely, stage space, proximity of light, darkness of the auditorium, muffled tone of the auditorium, whether it's a hall, proximity of the audience, if you can feel the presence of the people. If they are really close it's intimidating. I almost like that though, it's personal. I like a medium size audience. If it's too big you never know who you are reaching, if it's too small, it's too intense and there is nowhere for it to go.

Respondent B:

Definitely. The lighting really, really effects you, depending on the positioning of the lights, whether they are eye level...it can really knock you off balance and the height of the stage, like you are so used to rehearsing at floor level and then you get on to a stage, you are not on the floor and focus-wise, it is quite difficult.

Relationships with others

The relationship between the choreographer, artistic director and the company has a direct effect on the dancers' ability to experience flow. This suggests that the dancer must feel comfortable and confident in the social environment in which they dance. The dancers expressed a need for choreographers to relay corrections and criticism in a constructive fashion. This would enable them to feel more confident in their ability as dancers and thus facilitate the potential for flow within the piece.

Respondent B:

How they approach teaching you, to how they approach giving you corrections and if you don't have the confidence to think you can perform well, then you don't. You tend to be nervous and tend to forget because you are not in the zone. There is definitely a zone, I think, to be in [and they can help you].

Respondent G:

Don't use negatives in the vocabulary, like 'what I'm not seeing is...what's not happening is this'. I would like to hear specific directions on how to achieve what they are looking for. We [the dancers] need specifics to feel confident in the piece.

Respondent B:

But there are choreographers that will try and get a lot out of you and give you some praise and build you up and make you feel as though you can do the piece and are good enough to do the piece and you feel confident and that you can go onstage and you just forget everything 'cause you just feel that you can do it and then sometimes some of them don't make you feel so great and so you can't get into the zone at all.

In addition, relationships outside of the studio were found to have an effect on the dancers' flow experience on stage. The effect on the experience of flow was mixed. Some dancers believed that arguments could have a beneficial impact on their flow experience and others believed they had a detrimental effect on their flow experience.

Most often, the dancers believed that relationships and external problems must be ignored until their job is done.

Respondent D:

Ya, 'cause dance is so closely linked, emotionally. I find dance and movement linked. For me, dance is a way to get what I am feeling out, to express myself. It can change the dance; it brings out something different. Like if I'm agitated or angry, I am going to give a better performance; Like a little bit more aggressive.

Respondent G:

Sometimes external factors can have an effect. I have had to focus on a very material level and away from the emotional level. Whereas, if you have to do an emotional piece, and you are already distraught, then you would fly off the handle.

The presence of other dancers on stage had a direct effect on the dancers interviewed. Most of the dancers believed that the presence of others on stage could enhance their ability to experience flow, unless the person was associated with a negative mental attitude. Thus, when the company was confident and amicable, the experience of flow was easy to achieve. If the relationships between the dancers on stage were strained and negative, the experience of flow was difficult to achieve.

Respondent A:

Other dancers definitely influence my ability to get into flow, ya. Like you have a good bunch of dancers up on stage with you and you are having fun; that can increase your ability to get into flow. But if you have one that you don't like, or don't mesh with in the company, then ya, that can be frustrating. But your job as a dancer is to do your job: to dance and to get there [into flow].

Respondent D:

Well ya, they can help you or take you right out of it. It depends on how they perform. If you can feel that someone is really stressed around you, then that makes me really stressed.

Jackson (1992) discovered that skaters' relationships with their partners were a vital factor in facilitating flow. Being 'as one' with their partners enabled the flow experience to occur more readily. In addition, mistakes or a negative mental attitude of their partner affected them negatively and decreased their ability to experience flow.

The relationship between the dancer and the audience had a significant influence on flow experiences. Each dancer had their own opinion and perception of a good audience, yet all stated that the audience size and the audience's ability to interact with the dancers had a significant influence on flow experiences.

Respondent G:

I suppose you get a huge buzz from a large audience and if they respond well, then you can feel them engaging with you, they feed you energy, when you feel that support... That's really exciting, I enjoy that.

Respondent A:

If you have a good audience like 10 good ones, that is better than 2000 bad ones. It depends on how they react to what you are doing.

Respondent B:

When you have a small audience, you do try to stay in the zone...but it's a lot harder. It also makes you feel a little bit like 'no-one's come to watch me' and you have to build yourself up again to say, 'it's not 'cause no one wants to watch you it's 'cause no one has heard of the company'. That's very difficult, that can really take you out of the zone. It can make you feel like you put all this work into it and you're really striving to get what you want and the audiences that we had, they gave good feedback but it was a shame about the size of them. It would help us to get in the zone if there were more. 'cause we're here to please them as well, to give them something as well as to us.

Jackson (1992) found that a 'lack of audience response' had a direct effect on the figure skaters' ability to experience and maintain the experience of flow. Overall, the audience is a crucial predictor of the flow experience, with a small, non-existent or non-responsive audience hindering the performers' ability to achieve flow.

Variations and contradictions

The main themes found in professional dancers' subjective interpretation of the flow experience were mentioned by all of the dancers I interviewed except one. Initially, I was going to stop the interview, due to the fact that the dancer clearly stated that 'they had never been in flow and that it doesn't exist for some people'. However, after five minutes of questioning, I discovered that the dancer had indeed experienced flow, albeit in fragments of seconds over a dance career of nearing 30 years.

This dancer validated the criteria required for flow experience to occur and also contradicted the proposed theory that peak performances always involve flow. This dancer had been the principal dancer in many dance companies over a 22-year-long professional career, and yet never experienced flow to the extent of other elite dancers with the equivalent amount of talent and experience. As the interview went on, I exposed interesting flow inhibitors integrated throughout their dance career.

First of all, this dancer had never liked or enjoyed dancing. Enjoyment, mentioned numerous times before, is the key element to the flow experience. Subjects who do not enjoy a task are mentally powerless to experience flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Secondly, the dancer had absolutely no confidence in their abilities as a principal dancer. Thus, the second theme found in the experience of flow, confidence in self and skill, was violated. Every-time the dancer went on stage, they were plagued by self-doubt, negative thoughts of failure and anxiety. When a person is self-absorbed and too dependent on what other people think, there is no room left, mentally, to get into flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Therefore, a person preoccupied with external judgment, doubt and other task irrelevant stimuli could never reach pure absorption in the task, the third key theme found in the experience of flow in professional dancers.

In addition to the restrictions mentioned, the dancer had a traumatic past that was directly linked to dance. The dancer's inability to enjoy dance, feel confident and ultimately experience flow in its entirety could be influenced by traumatic occurrence.

The dancer confessed that a traumatic injury had forced them into dance as a form of physiotherapy at a very young age. Therefore, the dancer had always associated dance with trauma, fear and perhaps resentment.

The dancer's brief moments of flow had come during pieces that were heavily emotional, in which they could feel the pain of the choreographer and what they were trying to portray. This connection could be due to the dancer's traumatic past, limiting their flow experiences to pieces that demanded the dancer feel something more than the technical side of the dance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I was able to retrieve novel in-depth information about the experience of flow for professional dancers. IPA enabled me to go beyond quantitative restraints and feel, interpret and understand the experience of flow from an expert's position. The results supported Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) and Jackson's (1992) nine characteristics of flow. Enjoyment and the autotelic experience, challenge vs. skill and absorption in the task were the most predominant themes that emerged for the dancers. The study was also successful in retrieving first-hand information about the unique facilitators and inhibitors of an environment that would facilitate the experience of flow for elite dancers.

The results of the study have numerous implications for dance education. With the experience of flow being synonymous with peak performance (Kimiecik & Stein, 1992; Jackson, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990; Cohn, 1991), it is believed that athletes who experience flow will indeed exhibit their peak performances. Therefore choreographers and artistic directors who wish to create a superior performing company can use any application of these findings when they deem them appropriate. For example, simple elements of the environment can be manipulated in order to facilitate the dancer experiencing flow. Music, sound level, lighting, familiarity with the stage and its setting influenced the dancers' performance ability and flow experience. Individual and personal elements that enhanced flow included the need for confidence in the movements and a pre-performance routine. The social and interpersonal relationships between dancers and their choreographers need to be monitored and mended if tension or miscommunication is detected. Interestingly enough, costumes and make-up were found to influence (positively and negatively) the dancers' confidence and flow on stage.

This study discovered novel information and manipulations for creating and inhibiting the experience of flow. More research is needed in the area of dance and the flow phenomenon. Future research could employ other qualitative methodology to target a larger sample size. In addition, future researchers could isolate the type of dance and compare the findings to determine if one type of dance is more susceptible to the experience of flow than others. Finally, additional research on the circumstances that can inhibit the experience of flow would be necessary to explain the contradictory experience of the participant who violated the norm within this study.

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