

A phenomenological study of flow experiences during artistic activity and their relation to the artist's self-concept

by Patricia Karsten

Abstract

Social psychological conceptualizations of the self are characterized by binaries like individual-social or fragmentation-coherence which are difficult to reconcile. Flow experiences, described as pleasurable feelings of deep absorption which can occur in a variety of different activities, have been reported to lead to changes in perception of self which suggest that at least some of the binaries can be transcended. This research applied an interpretive phenomenological approach with the aim to explore how artists experience flow during their artistic activity and what these experiences mean for their sense of self. Two semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed and found (1) *Liberation and positive energy* (2) *Mastery by instinct* and (3) *An intensely personal moment* as themes representing participants' self-perception during flow. The findings were in line with earlier research on flow in the artistic domain which emphasized the perceived sense of unity, overcoming both the individual-social as well as the fragmentation-coherence duality, but they also showed that being or not being with others is not essential to flow.

Background and research question

Social psychology has studied the self from a variety of different angles. Historically, thinking about the self developed from an early unitary 'soul' concept. By introducing the idea of self-consciousness at the end of the 17th century, John Locke laid the groundwork for modernist understanding of self, characterized by the duality of observing and observed self. In this view, the self incorporates an imagined judgement and is thus inherently social:

“We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgements of the other mind” (Cooley 1902; as cited Hollway, 2007, p. 124)

The individual-social duality is reflected in Mead's distinction between 'I', the active observer, and 'me', the monitored self (1934; as cited in Hollway, 2007, p. 124). Sociological social psychology (SSP) thus conceptualized a reflexive self, characterized by the ability of a person to perceive herself from the perspective of others. Psychological social psychology (PSP) on the other hand, refrained from studying the self due to the difficulty of studying it scientifically, until Allport rehabilitated the subject based on the results of several experimental studies which suggested that the concept of self or 'ego' was essential for explaining coherent human behaviour (Allport 1943; as cited in Hollway, 2007).

But the notion of a coherent self has been radically challenged by discursive social psychology. In this perspective, the self does not exist as an objective entity, but instead is constructed and negotiated in ongoing discourse. This understanding of the self as multiple and fragmented points to another binary in psychological conceptualizations of the self, that of coherence vs fragmentation (Hollway, 2007). Contrasting to this, the phenomenological perspective, sees the self as inseparable from its 'lifeworld'. Important aspects of the lifeworld are its temporality (how time is experienced), spatiality (how space is experienced), embodiment (the self as acting and experiencing body), and intersubjectivity (the self in its relation to others) (Open University, 2008). Consequently, the phenomenological approach applies a qualitative methodology when studying the self and how it subjectively experiences its lifeworld.

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In this context, flow experiences shed an interesting light on how the self is perceived, and on the presented binaries individual-social and fragmented-coherent in understanding the self. Flow experiences denote a pleasurable state of deep absorption in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). They have been reported in a variety of different domains like sports, music and visual arts, and are typically accompanied by changes in self perception, like differences in sense of control over one's actions, differences in time perception and changes in awareness of self (Martin and Jackson, 2008). From a cognitive-neuropsychological perspective, Dietrich (2004) developed an explanation for experiential changes during flow based on the analysis of brain function. He explained the perceived ease of functioning in tasks demanding a high skill level with a dominance of the 'implicit' sensory-motor knowledge over the explicit system of higher cognitive functions associated with conscious control. Manzano, Harmat, Theorell and Ullén (2010) explored biophysiological changes associated with flow during piano playing. They found significant changes in heart period, blood pressure, and respiratory depth, among others.

At an experiential level, flow experience seem to be associated with a different sense of being-in-the-world ('Dasein') in Husserlian sense (Hollway, 2007) as is nicely captured in the description of a flow experience during a musical performance:

“We all melded together – everything fit just right – the musical sounds were encircling me. A state of alertness and focus – being in the moment, moment after moment.” (Bloom and Skutnick-Henley, 2005, p.26)

Bloom and Skutnick-Henley (2005) analyzed data from a survey among 90 adult amateur classical musicians. They applied a multiple regression analysis and identified 5 key predictors of flow, most importantly 'self-confidence ... while playing' and 'desire to experience and express feelings through music', but also the 'ability to play without self-criticism' (p. 25). Musician's short written descriptions of their flow experiences yielded 5 basic themes, which were named

- (1) absorption, heightened awareness, clear-mindedness
- (2) emotional involvement
- (3) sense of connection with others
- (4) sense of everything clicking into place
- (5) sense of transcendence

(Bloom and Skutnick-Henley, 2005, p.26). The study pointed to important aspects of flow experiences, but it was predominantly quantitative, permitting only numeric answers to previously known aspects of flow, besides short written descriptions from which these themes were derived. With a focus on the entire creative process, Nelson and Rawlings (2007) conducted a qualitative study from a phenomenological perspective. A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 11 professional artists from different domains like writing, visual arts and music led to 19 constituents which evolved around three strongly related dynamics: intuitive and analytical processes, unity and division in sense of self, and experience of freedom or constraint. Flow experiences, which constituted one aspect of the creative process, were related to intuitive processes, unity in sense of self and feelings of freedom.

The current research expanded on these studies by exploring the experiential richness of flow itself, as it occurs during artistic activity. Its aim was to shed light on the differences between 'normal' self-perception and self-perception during flow, and to gain more knowledge about the role of flow experiences for artistic activity. The research question was thus how artists experience flow and what these experiences mean for the artists' sense of self.

Method

The research was conducted from an interpretive phenomenological perspective and aimed at exploring subjective experiences in rich detail. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was chosen, based on semi-structured interviews with open questions. Individual interviews were preferred over group interviews to encourage elaboration on different aspects of flow experiences, and permit participants to talk about seemingly unimportant details, what might have been difficult in a group situation. Possible participants were approached informally among adult persons with an artistic background known to the researcher and on an internet forum for musicians. Two participants were selected on the basis that they performed an artistic activity at amateur or professional level, and that they reported to have had flow experiences during their activities in the past. They were a German female amateur musician (piano) and a French male professional visual artist (painting). Interviews were arranged in Berlin, Germany.

After a brief presentation of the research and assuring participants about the confidentiality and anonymity of their data and their right to withdraw from the research at any time, informed consent was obtained by having participants sign a translated version of the consent form (Appendix I). Participants were then asked to remember a flow experience and to report it in as much detail as possible. During the interview, the researcher posed follow-up questions to encourage participants to further expand on interesting aspects. The interviews were about 25 minutes in length and digitally recorded. The recordings were followed by an informal conversation to make sure that issues which may have arisen during the interview were resolved. To assure the researcher's safety, she carried a mobile phone with her and had informed a friend about date and venue of the interviews. Interviews and conversations were conducted in participants' native language to allow them to express their thoughts and feelings more authentically.

The interviews were fully transcribed and translated to English, all names were changed to protect anonymity. After listening to the interviews several times for familiarization, a thematic analysis was conducted. Each transcript was first analyzed separately line by line and annotated with brief descriptive labels and comments about its content (Appendix II). In a second step, the annotated transcripts were analyzed for emergent themes in participants' statements, grouping themes together with relevant quotes (Appendix III). The final step consisted in selecting only those themes which were central to flow experiences and sense of self, and structuring them into overarching and sub-themes together with the most representative quotes. The themes from both participants were combined to produce the table of overarching themes (Appendix IV). The phenomenological lifeworld concepts of temporality, spatiality, embodiment and intersubjectivity were considered where they emerged from themes and statements.

Based on a research journal and reflexive notes taken after each interview appointment, a reflexive analysis was conducted to assess the researcher's influence on the research. This included the way the interviews were conducted and the influence of the researcher's values and beliefs on the analytic process and thus on the findings from the research.

Analysis

In response to the question to remember a flow experience and to describe it in as much detail as possible, both participants gave a detailed account of how they experience flow and what it means for their artistic activity. Analysing these accounts, three major overarching themes emerged:

- (1) Liberation and positive energy

- (2) Mastership by instinct
- (3) An intensely personal moment

These themes were strongly related to the flow experience itself, while at the same time providing a key to understanding how both participants conceptualized their artistic activity.

Flow – Liberation and positive energy

After beginning a session of their artistic activity, both participants need some time until they get into a flow state. Reaching flow is then experienced as liberation and intense release of positive energy, as reflected in the sub-themes ‘preparation and liberation’ and ‘intense positive energy’. Both participants’ experiences are thus characterized by a strong affective component, which can be seen as an embodiment aspect of their lifeworld.

For K, the preparatory phase consists in repeated playing of a piece. She deliberately seeks to adapt to the mood and atmosphere of the musical piece she is playing [359-361]. Entering into flow state is then perceived as intense happiness.

“And that is what, erm, I play them, and I play them again, and then I play them again, and sometimes, when I’ve played them 4, 5 or 6 times consecutively, then comes this moment, where I simply (.) play.” [26-29]

“And that’s the moment, where I, erm (.), yes, where I have this, this very deep feeling of happiness, this kind of ,Yes!’ . It is simply (.) wonderful.” [36-39]

For JM, a typical situation where flow occurs is after a phase of inner struggle while working on a painting which culminates in destruction of the artwork, associated with an intense feeling of energy release. To illustrate this, JM uses the analogy of a long distance runner.

“that feeling of flow, it often happens after a complete destruction. ... That is, erm, you work, you reflect, you try to make it, you’re not satisfied because there’s kind of, just there, you’re in a state of anxiousness to do good, do poor, and so on, ... , but there’s always a moment where, erm, you say shit, that’s, it’s not possible, and so you destroy it. And the moment when you destroy, erm, what you’ve done, it’s then where that feeling of letting loose appears.” [91-101]

“So it’s, just, it’s because you move, because you’re stressed, because, because there was a failure, often, so it may be related to that moment of destruction, so, it’s (.) it’s like you shift a gear to a different velocity. ... a moment where ... it doesn’t work, where you feel pain like a runner who feels pain, and then, suddenly, it doesn’t hurt anymore. ... A moment, you, you, it runs, it flows. [344-354]

For K, the positive emotional effects of flow are so strong that they last for an extended period after the actual flow state, identified in the sub-theme ‘emotional spill-over effects’.

“And it, resonates for longer, maybe, maybe through the whole day, or even through the next day.” [39-40]

“I’m like singing through the day. ... then everything is coloured in rose, and everything is so beautiful, and it gives me much positive energy,” [200-203]

For JM, entering into flow state after destruction of the painting is experienced as a starting point for creativity, represented in the sub-theme 'creative departure'.

“... suddenly you can mix up everything, that is, all the colours that are there, you can make something out of it which is completely, erm, like a table, like a blank page, you know. ... there are areas that are going to connect, ... it's a bit like magma, without defined shape. And in that shapeless magma, it's as if in there ... the creation will enter.” [120-128]

Flow – Mastership by instinct

Both participants experience changes in perceived control over their activity during flow. For both, flow is related to a feeling of less thinking and judgement while at the same time being intensely concentrated, captured in the sub-themes of 'focused attention and diminished conscious control'.

K: “I don't have to think anymore, I just play, and then I'm very deeply immersed in that piece.” [29-30]

JM: “There's ... no judgement anymore, ... rather a kind of confidence in what happens, and then you look at what's happening.” [136-138]

JM: “Like a hunter ... who throws his lance towards ... the animal. If he thinks too much ... it won't work.” [169-170]

At the same time, there is a strong feeling of skill and mastership, identified as sub-theme 'sense of competence'.

K: “Then it does happen sometimes, that I say, yes, then comes the moment where I say 'Yes!', I can do it, it's just great.” [173-175]

JM: “... it's complete mastership, so it's like somebody ... who throw arrows.” [157-158]

The changes in perceived control extend to how the body is experienced, represented in the sub-theme 'subconscious body'.

K: “I have my hands very warm and smooth ...they move in a different kind of way. ... maybe consciously moved, but simply function on a more subconscious level, and can play ... very softly and smoothly” [69-73]

JM: “... it's like, like a trance ... you take things up, you're fast, you move ...[108-111]

JM: “... the body movements and the painting that give the direction.” [134-135]

The overarching theme strongly reflect the embodiment aspect of participants' lifeworld regarding flow experience, in that it shows how flow encompasses changes in both mental and bodily perception of self.

Flow – An intensely personal moment

This theme incorporates how participants perceive flow as an intensely personal moment, to which the presence of others is adverse. Knowing this, both develop strategies to avoid or minimize distraction from others, captured in the sub-theme 'deliberately closing out others'.

K selects moments for playing the piano when she is alone at home. If she is not physically alone because her husband or children are there, she tries to mentally filter out the distracting effect.

“I do have it when my family is at home, but then it’s more difficult, because I’m more distracted, from noises.” [169-171]

“maybe, I need to have calm surroundings, but I think, erm, sometimes erm it also just happens when, when I know that everyone’s at home, but, it’s still, I still have enough inner calmness to say, and now I just play, and play, and am able to, able to simply filter out the rest.” [189-193]

JM emphasizes how he does not want to be disturbed when in flow, and won’t answer phone calls [113-115]. He blends out thoughts about future audience for his paintings and predicts adverse effects from consciousness about audience, using the analogy of an athlete at the Olympic games.

JM: “...before starting, he’ll have the feeling that everyone looks at him, erm, and the problem is, there are some for whom it cuts their, erm, it cuts their capacities, to know that they’re being looked at, and that there’s something at stake, and that the, that the country counts on them ... I think that the task of an athlete is also to, in that mo-, it’s to forget all that ... and a painter, it’s similar, I mean ... for a professional, if you want to prepare a large exposition in a well-known museum, you cannot say to yourself beforehand, ‘Oh my God, I’m’, (.) it’s, it has, (.) because it’s rather negative.” [275-287]

K sees flow as private experience which is not outwards directed and not competitive, represented in the sub-theme ‘inner achievement’.

“it’s not like in the sense of, yes, feeling of success or attainment, so it, it’s something erm, when you, I don’t know, professional success or so, then you have that inside, too, but this is I think it’s (.) different, because it, it’s something very, erm, something very lonely happening there, it’s not directed towards the outer world, somehow, and I think professional success is something directed towards the outer world, and visible. This is something which actually isn’t that visible. [211-219]

“And ... maybe you also want to achieve in sports and be competitive, to get a certain recognition, but it has in no way to do with it, it’s a completely different kind of achievement ...” [227-230]

Both participants are connected in a special way to the object of their attention, captured in the sub-theme ‘relationship with the object of activity’. K deliberately creates and maintains an emotional relationship to the musical piece. Following a method suggested by her teacher, she invents a story for the piece which reflects its mood and atmosphere [390-398]. This helps her to recreate the emotion during play and represents an important aspect of her flow experience.

“So erm, that was kind of my idea and this made playing erm, to feel the atmosphere, not only play sheet music, but basically, to play an atmosphere. And that’s, what will be the step forward, some day, when you pass over the state of just playing keys” [405-409]

“Music is very moving for me, ... something very important for me, and yes, that’s why I have that attitude, to open up for it” [464-466]

JM also enters into an exclusive, intense relationship with his painting, which is perceived as an focused discourse over a short period of time.

“It doesn’t last long you know, it lasts, maybe an hour.” [115-116]

“... when you’re painting, there is kind of discourse with the painting, with, and actually you’re not at all alone ... But at the same time, there’s no-one there, in the moment of painting.” [253-257]

“like the people, don’t know who ... throw stones, if you say for example, I want to hit that tree with the stone ... there are people who always hit the goal, they, because, because, I don’t know how they do it, they are in a, kind of relation. And a painting, it’s a bit like that, there’s a moment, you throw stones, and you, you (.)” [157-167]

This theme highlights the intersubjectivity of participants’ lifeworlds regarding flow. They prefer to transitorily suspend social relations and concentrate on the object of their activity. JM’s account also reflects the temporality of his flow experience.

Discussion including reflexive critique

Three overarching themes were found to characterize participants’ flow experiences. The first theme ‘liberation and positive energy’ captured how both participants needed a preparatory phase in their activity, and then experienced reaching flow as a pleasurable feeling of energy release. While K’s strong emotional involvement with her music was reflected in the idiographic sub-theme ‘emotional spill-over effect’, JM’s account showed the importance of flow for the artistic goals in his paintings in the sub-theme ‘creative departure’.

The second theme ‘mastership by instinct’ with its sub-themes ‘diminished conscious control’, ‘focused attention’, ‘sense of competence’ and ‘subconscious body’ captured how flow was perceived as a shift to a less controlled, more intuitive mode of mental and physical functioning and strongly reflected the embodied aspects of participants’ flow experiences.

The last theme ‘an intensely personal moment’ with its shared sub-themes ‘deliberately closing out others’ and ‘relationship with the object of activity’ suggested that for both participants, being in flow consisted in a temporary replacement of social relations by an intense and exclusive relation with the object of their activity. K’s idiographic sub-theme ‘inner achievement’ further emphasized the self-focus of her experience. The overarching theme thus illustrated the intersubjectivity aspect of participants’ lifeworld regarding flow.

These findings took up many of the aspects from earlier research about flow in artistic activity. The theme ‘liberation and positive energy’ is in line with the reported pleasurableness and sense of joy and freedom during flow (Nelson and Rawlings 2007). The emergence of idiographic sub-themes here may be related to the different artistic domains of the two participants, music and visual arts. Bloom and Skutnik-Henley (2005) pointed to the importance of emotional involvement for flow in classical musicians, a domain where the interpretation of existing music is important. On the other hand, Nelson and Rawlings (2007) identified three constituents related to the sense of creating something new, which seemed to be reflected in JM’s account of the creative struggle when painting and its resolution during flow.

The theme ‘mastership by instinct’ is also very much in line with previous findings about changes in perceived control and getting into a more automatic, high performance mode of functioning

during flow, as for example in Bloom and Skutnik-Henley's 'sense of everything clicking into place' (2005, p.26). Nelson and Rawlings (2007) identified the constituent 'unity in sense of self', which was the result of a shift to an intuitive mode of action, based on a sense of effortlessness and non-awareness of technical aspects of the activity.

But the theme 'an intensely personal moment' seem to contradict earlier findings, at least for the musical domain. Bloom and Skutnik-Henley identified the 'sense of connectedness with others' (2005, p. 26) as important aspect of flow experiences in musicians, and a tendency for flow to be reached more easily when playing in an ensemble than when playing alone. An amateur photographer personally known to the researcher reported a flow experience related to a portrait session where he took turns with another person in photographing and being portrayed. The smooth interaction between the partners appeared essential for his flow experience. Contrasting to this, in Nelson and Rawlings (2007) study there was no mention of other person's influence upon the creative process. This suggests that flow cannot be characterized as an inherently individual or social experience for the self, instead it may depend on the type of activity as well as on individual dispositions.

The research had been informed by my interest in art and music, and by my own activities as amateur painter and piano player. I therefore recognized the importance of the phenomenological concept of 'Epoché' (see for example Langdrige, 2008), of stepping back and putting aside prior understandings as far as possible, and to open up for the research participants' possibly different experiences, avoiding to impose my own understanding of flow. I value creativity and self-actualization highly and felt very positively towards the participants. This hopefully contributed to an atmosphere where participants felt they were understood and valued, and thus were confident to share their experiences.

During the interviews, it became apparent that both participants were not referring to one particular flow experience as asked in the opening question, but instead were generalizing over several occurrences. During the interviews, I did not insist upon selecting a particular flow instance to avoid interrupting participants' narrative. This had an impact on the findings insofar that the research yielded knowledge about the general and typical features of participants' flow experiences, rather than representing unique characteristics of one particular moment in their lives.

The themes that were found were the result of an analytic process which reflected my understanding as a researcher of what participants had said, all the more as both interviews were translated into English for the purpose of this research. Structuring the rich and diverse interview data and selecting those themes which seemed to best represent participants' flow experiences was a difficult task, based on my subjective judgement. This included for example the decision to leave out the emancipation theme in K's piano playing activity, emerging from her balancing family demands with the desire for self-actualization, on the grounds that I perceived it as not central to the actual flow experience. A researcher with a stronger feminist perspective might have decided otherwise.

The chosen phenomenological approach allowed to explore the subjective richness of flow experiences during participants' artistic activity. The phenomenological lifeworld concepts of embodiment and intersubjectivity proved very useful for interpreting the themes, while temporality and spatiality appeared less relevant to participants' experiences. An inherent limitation of the phenomenological approach was that the findings from two participants did not permit to draw general conclusions about flow experiences, but it was nevertheless possible to interpret them in light of other research. The research thus highlighted the experienced changes in self-perception in flow during artistic activity.

In answering the research question about the role of flow for the artist's self-concept, the findings supported the notion that flow in artistic activity is accompanied by changes in sense of self which are perceived as pleasurable, liberating and energizing. In leading to a sense of unity of self, experienced as intuitive mastery, flow also seems to be able to bypass the binary of fragmented vs coherent sense of self and the mind-body duality. Flow experiences seem to be beyond the individual-social duality in that relations to others can temporarily be replaced by an intense relation to the object of the activity, although flow can also be experienced in interaction with others. For future research on flow and the sense of self during artistic activity it might be interesting to further explore intersubjectivity aspects, to shed more light on the question in how far flow is both an individual and a social phenomenon.

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