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Examining State of Flow and its Future in Dance/Movement Therapy: A Literature Review

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Meg H. Chang, EDD, BC-DMT, LCAT

Examining State of Flow and its Future in Dance/Movement Therapy: A Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2022

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract

This paper analyzes State of Flow, the definition codified by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and analyzes how Flow as a concept has developed in current psychological and artistic research, alternative therapies, and mainstream medias. This paper also views existing Dance/Movement Therapy frameworks such as Body-Mind Centering and Kestenberg Movement Profile to see how Csikszentmihalyi's definition could integrate into current Dance/Movement Therapy practice, as well as looks at Laban Movement Analysis and its future in Dance/Movement Therapy. This thesis also examines how gender and neurodivergence may impact how one can experience State of Flow.

Keywords: state of flow, body-mind centering, flow, neurodivergent, hyperfocus, Laban, Kestenberg movement profile, dance/movement therapy

Author Identity Statement: The author identifies as a White, Jewish, cisgender, woman. This author also acknowledges she lives on Pokanoket, Wampanoag, and Massachusetts land.

Examining State of Flow and its Future in Dance/Movement Therapy: A Literature Review

Introduction

State of Flow, first coined by Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the 1970's, is defined as "being completely involved in the activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. . . Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost" (Geirland, 1996, para. 2). This is a concept that is heavily integrated into the field known as positive psychology, an area of study that researches "the human experiences and strengths that make life most worth living" (Brokaw, 2021, para. 1). Csikszentmihalyi believed that Flow is integral to what he called an "optimal experience", and it makes people happier to be in Flow regularly. To be in an optimal experience, one must "feel in control of our actions. . . a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 3). When writing about the connection between State of Flow and being in an optimal experience, he states "the best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult or worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we make happen" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 3). This thesis will examine the concept of State of Flow defined by Csikszentmihalyi, how it is being viewed and researched in the current day, and how it can be implemented into Dance/Movement Therapy by means of current existing frameworks such as Kestenberg Movement Profile and Body-Mind Centering, if it would be the center of its own framework, as well as the analysis of the history and implementation of flow in Laban Movement Analysis. Kestenberg Movement Profile, shortened to KMP, was developed by Dr. Judith Kestenberg in the late 1960's, and is:

a distinct theory of infant/child development. . . a theory that synthesized her body-mind integration approach with relational development, attachment theory, ego-psychology, and psychoanalysis through seeing that the relational elements give structure and shape to drives, temperament, defenses, and coping skills. (Kestenberg Amighi et al., 2018, p. 2)

KMP focuses heavily on human development, and how the childhood and early life of an individual shapes their entire life and world view, making it a framework that relies heavily on neuroscience and psychodynamic concepts and standards. KMP can be broken down into:

four distinct movement clusters: tension flow rhythms (that reflect unconscious needs and biological drives) tension flow attributes (that reflect temperament and expression of affects), pre-efforts (that reflect immature ways of coping, often used in learning and defensive behaviors), and efforts (used in coping with space, weight, and elements).

(Kestenberg Amighi et al., 2018, p. 4)

As mentioned in the quote, KMP focuses on the internal and unconscious expressions of the body to be brought to the attention of the conscious mind and be recognized through the movement.

Terminology and the base structure of this framework were heavily influenced by Laban Movement Analysis, known as LMA, or colloquially referred to solely as Laban in dance spaces. Laban Movement Analysis is considered the universal written language and codification of dance and movement and has been the subject of much debate in recent years, partially due to the personal history of Rudolf Laban when this written language was being developed. Laban “was asked by the Third Reich to create pageants and movement choirs that were then used in Nazi propaganda. The original myth was that he left Germany in protest of these political movements, but this has been disputed widely” (Davis et al., 2021, p. 3). While it is named after Rudolf

Laban, other people worked with him directly and developed the system further including Geraldine Stephenson, Sam and Susi Thornton, Irmgard Bartenieff, Warren Lamb, and others (Bradley, 2018). Much of the current debate about this system is about whether LMA should be taught to dancers in their home studios or in collegiate and graduate classes at all, and if so, how to approach this system while also not perpetuating the “racial and cultural bias . . . systems of White European dominance” (Davis et al., 2021, p. 2). There is also much discussion about whether one singular framework or language can be applied universally to all movement (Millrod et al., 2021). While observing movement, “the observer using LMA considers elements they perceive to be pertinent, whether they are central to the mover or not” (Davis et al., 2021, p. 5). The observer is deeming what is important to the movement, not necessarily the mover, and “wherein the form loses identifying features, historical context, and cultural connections to the communities within which it was developed” (Davis et al., 2021, p. 6). If the observer does not know the historical or communal context behind the movement, its significance is lost when using LMA to analyze it. Body-Mind Centering, developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, was developed at her school of Body-Mind Centering starting in 1973, and theories were established by 1982 (Bainbridge Cohen, 2012). BMC focuses on anatomy and physiology and uses the body to express the thoughts and feelings of the mind. The term “centering” refers to the journey of balancing the body and the mind together, rather than the action of being balanced, “discovering the relationship between the smallest level of activity within the body and the largest movement of the body by aligning the inner cellular movement with the external expression of movement through space” (Bainbridge Cohen, 2012, p. 1). While KMP and BMC can both be embodied movement frameworks for Dance/Movement Therapy, KMP places more emphasis on the development of oneself and how that influences all of life, and BMC focuses more on the

internal anatomy and physiology of the body to reflect what is in the mind. I connected with Body-Mind Centering in particular when exploring frameworks currently being used in Dance/Movement Therapy and took into high esteem the emphasis on the body and the anatomy, focusing on the smallest part of the body to make it whole.

This thesis will also explore how State of Flow is expressed differently in neurodivergent brains and how that can impact daily life. Specifically, exploring Flow in brains diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. Although this paper will focus on improvisational movement for the sake of Flow in Dance/Movement Therapy, there is also exploration of literature analyzing choreographed movement with Flow and how the different types of movement may present different appearances of Flow.

It is important for this topic to be explored because analyzing how a brain in Flow state versus a brain out of Flow state operate differently from each other can be used for further explorations in both daily life and in Expressive Therapies and creative activities. Being able to identify how Flow is being studied currently helps movement communities see what needs more study and evolve the field. Showing that the brain has the capacity to be creative, and be fully immersed in that creativity, would be beneficial to even non-movers seeking out Dance/Movement Therapy and bring healthy creative outlets into their daily lives. As the understandings of mental illness are constantly evolving with more study and societal contexts, it is just as important to study Flow in neurodivergent people as it is to study neurotypical people.

State of Flow as an area of study is important to me because it is something I had been interested in ever since first learning about it, and I believe there is a great benefit to consider placing an emphasis on Flow in Dance/Movement Therapy. I would feel like a child constantly asking, “why and how does this work?” because I wanted to absorb everything. Being a creative

and artistic person, I rely on being in Flow for much of my work, and I attempted to make myself aware of how to initiate Flow for myself and keep it as a stable and practiced method to help accomplish tasks for my own benefit. When doing cursory research on how to achieve Flow, many tips involved movement (taking a walk outdoors through nature, stretching before and during task, recognizing natural posture, etc.), and that guided the development of this topic. This has also influenced how to integrate Flow into Dance/Movement Therapy in the future.

Method

For this literature review thesis, I primarily looked for research and articles from the last five to seven years at most, but of course when talking about Flow, older research from Csikszentmihalyi must be acknowledged and counted separately from current research. When researching online, I had to use the full search phrase of “State of Flow”, rather than just “Flow”, because it is such a common word that I would be recommended articles that had nothing to do with positive psychology or mental health. Also, I had to distinguish between sites that discussed Flow State rather than an alpha brainwave state, such as one listing activities that were more meditative than Flow inducing. For example, an article from the *Huff Post*, saying to “clear and calm the mind” (Nemour, 2017, para. 6) when referring a mind in State of Flow, when clearing the mind entirely would take out the immersion of the task itself and meditative flow. These are not necessarily the same concept; this is showing how the terms can be perceived as interchangeable to the general public. I had also noticed that using the term “movement” rather than “dance” was more beneficial to finding articles and research, especially when looking at how to integrate State of Flow into Dance/Movement Therapy. Just using the word “dance” would not result in the same articles or the same number of articles as using the word “movement”. Often when finding articles that had the word “dance”, they were about structured

and choreographed dance, while articles using the term “movement” were referring to unstructured and improvised movement, which is more conducive to Dance/Movement Therapy. When gathering the citations necessary to complete the references page, many of the citations that were provided alongside a given digital article were listed incorrectly and had to be fixed manually by referring to the physical formatting guide for reference citations.

When exploring how to initiate Flow while writing this thesis, I noticed that my phone had to be in another location entirely (or out of sight), and energetic music that I was familiar with had to be playing. I could not focus if it was silent or if it was calm music, it had to be music from my work-out playlists or video game soundtracks, as those are designed to not compete with the tasks being accomplished. Only then would Flow even have a chance of making an appearance in my writing process. To keep myself on track on revision tasks and to maintain Flow, I would make a checklist of tasks or edits that I wanted to accomplish each time I sat at my desk to work. I would often stretch before sitting down and take multiple stretch breaks throughout the time I would be working. If I was feeling too overwhelmed or unsure what to do next, I would walk around my house or my street and mentally map out what I wanted to accomplish right then, and what could wait for another time. I would also set timers and challenge myself to get a specific task done before the timer was done. If I was working while not in a State of Flow, I would also take regular breaks away from my computer and either watch a fun video, play a game, or talk with a friend to give myself time to process what I had worked on and what I wanted to do next. Minimal to no progress would be made if I tried to write on the same day I had already worked, regardless of if I was working in person or remotely. My peak hours were early in the morning right after waking up, between the times of 4pm-7pm, or late night into the very early hours in the morning on any given day of writing. While knowing my

own requirements for Flow, it was not always guaranteed that it would be initiated when trying to write. Often, the days where I wanted to research or write would be days that I was unable to due to pre-determined tasks, and the days I would set aside to dedicate solely to this project, there would always be something else to do, and I would find myself getting distracted and not able to work. While taking stretching or exercising breaks, I found that Flow would be initiated in the movement, and I would have an easier time resetting and going back to writing or researching.

Using a heuristic method to determine how Flow appears and works for me has influenced how I advocate for State of Flow to be integrated into Dance/Movement Therapy. Meaning ‘to learn for oneself’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), my heuristic experience with Flow is the main resource when analyzing how to bring the concept further into the practice of Dance/Movement Therapy, and how using it as a keystone for therapeutic techniques and frameworks.

Literature Review

State of Flow is not a new concept. Although the phrase was coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow in the body as a concept has existed in practices as ancient as tai chi, yoga, and meditation. However, in these practices, flow is often imagined as energy flowing through the body. For example, tai chi is about “creating a balance between mind, body, and nature, while encouraging a heightened state of health and wellness” (Herzog, 2011, para. 1). Tai chi places the emphasis on flow for health and spiritual reasons, and not necessarily to complete a task. The practice of meditation has evolved and become more accessible through time, particularly with the rise of the internet and social media, and mobile meditation applications. There are many different forms of meditation, and “more rigorous studies need to be performed

to elucidate the nuanced imaging and electrophysiological changes that occur with each type of meditation” (Lee et al., 2018, p. 5). With some meditational practices favoring an alpha brainwave state, those would technically not fit with Csikszentmihalyi’s definition of Flow, as a practitioner may not be immersed in the activity, but rather actively letting the mind wander and be focused on multiple thoughts to process. Csikszentmihalyi wrote about yoga and Flow, stating:

the similarities between Yoga and flow are extremely strong; in fact it makes sense to think of Yoga as a very thoroughly planned flow activity. Both try to achieve a joyous, self-forgetful involvement through concentration, which in turn is made possible by a discipline of the body. Some critics, however, prefer to stress the differences between flow and Yoga. Their main divergence is that, whereas flow attempts to fortify the self, the goal of Yoga and many other Eastern techniques is to abolish it. . . Therefore, it can be argued, Yoga and flow tend toward diametrically opposite outcomes. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 105)

The understanding that two concepts can be so similar but also so different and contested is one of the many reasons that State of Flow has been intriguing. While this may be a discussion of semantics rather than methodologies and beliefs, this shows the fluid nature of Flow and how it can be easily interpreted in many ways.

Often when in Flow, someone is doing a task they find joy in, and therefore it brings them to a state of happiness, and no internal or external stimulation matters besides that single task. State of Flow can also be used for tasks that are not necessarily regarded as fun, but will still provide satisfaction when done. Regarding this phenomenon of existence melting away, Csikszentmihalyi stated in his TEDTalk:

He can't feel even that he's hungry or tired. His body disappears, his identity disappears from his consciousness, because he doesn't have enough attention, like none of us do, to do really well something that requires a lot of concentration, and at the same time to feel that he exists. So existence is temporarily suspended. And he says that his hand seems to be moving by itself. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004, 08:43)

As in, the body and brain are literally flowing together to get the task done. The body and the conscious brain work on getting the task done, whether by moving the hands, the rest of the body, or what is needed to complete the task; while the person doing the task completely forgets about bodily functions and other stressors that are not directly impacting the project being worked on. The challenge level of the task is equal to the skill level of the person attempting the task, which is the key to initiate Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004). If the skill level is more than the task requires, that is when the brain can zone out of said task and can go on autopilot. This is referred to as an 'alpha brainwave state', and a common example of this is the phenomenon of not remembering the drive home from work because the driver goes on 'autopilot' when repeating a mundane task, meaning the body takes over with muscle memory and not engaging with the brain. While the body is focused on the task, the brain is focusing on potentially many other things, like reflecting on the events of a day or what the next meal will be. Time escapes recognition in this state, much like State of Flow, but the conscious brain is not aware of the task being done at all, making this not fit with Csikszentmihalyi's definition of Flow. Alpha brainwaves are "most notably seen in various stages of sleep" (Lee et al., 2018, p. 4). These concepts often become interchangeable in the modern eye but are inherently different because Flow is the intense concentration of a task and is peak brain activity, while alpha frequency is when the brain is more relaxed and reflecting, and not at peak performance. Meanwhile, if the

skill level is less than the task requires, then the task will not be complete or at least, will not be completed correctly and efficiently. There is a balance of the skill level required for the task and the brain power present to follow through on this task to achieve State of Flow. The brain and nervous system are constantly processing and analyzing new information, and “the human body sends 11 million bits per second to the brain for processing, yet the conscious mind seems to be able to process only 50 bits per second” (Markowsky, 2017, para. 73). With this processing speed, a brain in a State of Flow is using all fifty bits per second to be fully immersed in a task, and not trying to be aware of anything else.

Csikszentmihalyi created the foundation that Flow research is progressively being built upon today. However, as stated before, this was not a new concept, even to him:

To call this a ‘discovery’ is perhaps misleading, for people have been aware of it since the dawn of time. Yet the word is appropriate, because even though my finding itself was well known, it had not been described or theoretically explained by the relevant branch of scholarship, which in this case happens to be psychology. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 2)

As mentioned before, a concept of flow is found in tai chi and yoga, but another example is Reiki healing. Reiki healing is a Japanese energy and spiritual healing practice and is widely used around the world, often in tandem with clinical health settings (International Association of Reiki Professionals, 2021). However, alternative therapies and practices such as this, especially ones that are aligned with Eastern medicine, are often ridiculed, and not taken seriously by the Western world. The practice of Reiki, especially in the United States, “continues to struggle in finding its permanent place among the portfolio of complementary and alternative medicine modalities in many military health care facilities” (Gantt & Orina, 2020, p. 394). Although this study found very positive results in their use of Reiki treatments in their subjects, one even

showing “there was significant decrease ($P < 0.001$) in present, average, and worst pain over the course of the six sessions with the most significant effect occurring up to the fourth session” (Gantt & Orina 2020, p. 398), it is often thought of as a scam, or as nonsense. In a stand-up comedy set by Micky Flanagan, he pokes fun at the hand motions Reiki professionals will use during their sessions and implies that if they are just flinging negative energy away, then he should be able to wave his hands around the bill and make it go away like a magic trick, and the audience is loudly laughing and clapping along the entire time (Flanagan 2020). This demonstrates the skepticism for Reiki, and is shown to other alternative therapies as well, and why further research is needed to educate the masses on what has led these therapies and theories to thrive for so long. Although the general opinion of Reiki may be overly critical, another study done in a medical center showed “90% of patients reported improvement in symptoms of pain, anxiety, general discomfort, insomnia, or nausea. When discussing side effects of the Reiki intervention, most commonly patients fell asleep” (Jurkovich & Watson, 2020, p. 406). When searching for alternative or supplemental therapies, especially ones with limited or acceptable side effects, the same ones being ridiculed by the general public are the same ones that are having studies done and showing quantitative results. When introducing the concept of Dance/Movement Therapy to people who are not familiar with Expressive Therapies, it can deem the same amount of ridicule and confusion as other alternative therapies, and practitioners are having to convince people that there is benefit to these theories and practices, before they dismiss it as useless or ineffective solely because they do not know anything about it, or think they cannot participate in Dance/Movement Therapy because they are not dancers or do not know how to dance. Bringing more exposure and solidified evidence and research that these practices can have merit and they can help people with mental and physical illnesses will help

validate the wide field of Expressive Arts Therapies overall, as well as Dance/Movement Therapy at the same time.

Current Research of State of Flow

Flow is still being studied at this time as well, in many different contexts and environments in the dance and movement communities, as well as in other communities and researching scopes. For example, “One area of flow research requiring more explanation is among nontraditional sports and among sport and performance spaces that are unique to minority performers” (Smith et al., 2020, p. 144). Examples of nontraditional sports include parkour, Ninja Warrior, Vogue dance performance, as well as many extreme sports. Vogue dance is a style of dance that relies on posing the body similarly to fashion and magazine models. Currently, there is not much research of minority groups and Flow, and “expanding flow research to include intersectional and culturally diverse experiences will provide a deeper understanding of the complexity of flow” (Smith et al., 2020, p. 146). This same article also discusses the community-building aspect of dance and Vogue, in House and Ball Culture, and emphasizes “dance has many forms and subcultures, which provides a liberating space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQ/IA) Black and Latinx people from restrictive experiences” (Smith et al., 2020, p. 145). As stigmas around race and sexual orientation continue to break down, and people feel freer to express themselves truthfully in the modern and mainstream, the dance community remains a safe space of expression and a space for continued exploration of culture and where Flow can be experimented with. If experimenting with Flow in these spaces allows them to still be safe, non-judgmental, and community driven, there should be much more research in minority and stigmatized groups.

A thesis written in 2015 was experimenting with Flow in the process of choreography and choreographed performative movement. This was in a pedagogical setting with skilled dancers, as well as the author herself participating in this experiment. Responses were gathered by a questionnaire, and it asked the same questions each time it was presented, like asking what pulled the dancers in and out of their Flow. When performing their Flow performance:

The moment of turning towards the audience was so powerful for Bryn because she saw how the lighting was cast over her skin, could feel the energy of the audience with the front of her body, and could also feel the warmth of the room. In that moment she was not thinking about what came next in the dance or what she would be doing after the performance. She was so taken with the simplistic beauty of her arm in the light.

(Zoller, 2015, p. 81).

Bryn being so focused on the lights from the stage and not on the choreography or the rest of her environment is just one example of Flow from this experiment. Another instance of Flow was interestingly while one of the dancers was not in Flow, but rather “looking at the audience for the first time, Bryn became distracted and self-conscious, the same moment I was deeply immersed in the piece” (Zoller, 2015, p. 82). This shows that Flow is different for everybody, and is an individual experience, and dancers can be performing the same piece and one can be in complete Flow and the other could be distracted and extremely aware of everything and everyone staring at her while dancing. Although the rest of this paper will focus on improvised movement, it was important to add in this research with choreographed movement to show that Flow is possible with it as well, and that according to this experiment, it is observable when in the moment.

Another thesis being studied for this was written in 2018 by Klara Łucznik, analyzing group improvisational Flow in dance. Information was gathered through interviews with the

groups of dancers and came to multiple conclusions. Not the least of which being “group flow was rather rare and it was more likely when a group had worked together for longer” (Łuczniak, 2018, p. vi). Not only that, but groups that were experiencing Flow and those who were not were also moving differently, “a group in a high-flow state engaged with a task in a more complex way, sharing, transforming, and supporting each other’s ideas, while low-flow groups worked more with mimicry and body manipulation” (Łuczniak, 2018, p. vi). This lines up with experiences throughout my own dance life, dancing with new people for the first time is more awkward as the boundaries and preferences of the movers are learned, and as time goes on, moving with those same people gets easier and can more easily induce Flow while moving. However, a commonly referred to aspect of how to achieve Flow is the balance of challenge and skill, where that does not become as relevant in group improvisational dance (Łuczniak, 2018), because different techniques are more challenging than others, and everyone has their own strengths with movement. With improvised movement, there is no amount of prior technical skill that is required; therefore, one can be doing techniques or steps that may be considered technically easy to a trained dancer, but they will still be able to achieve Flow by moving and dancing. When first working with improvisational movement, it is difficult for trained dancers to not feel like they must show off all their own tricks and instead actually just move any way they like, and “only one person mentioned that being successful in improvisation requires a certain level of skill” (Łuczniak, 2018, p. 70). While improvisation itself is a tool taught to dancers, it is also a de-learning process in the way of learning how to move freely with other people for enjoyment. When the groups were in Flow with each other, “effortless attention and enjoyment were the most predominant themes that emerged from the dancers’ reports while describing flow” (Łuczniak, 2018, p. 70). Moving for the sake of enjoyment and movement itself was at the

core of these experiences and allowed Flow to thrive when it was making an appearance in these groups. Klara Łuczniak and Jon May later published an article relating to her thesis in 2021, which also agrees with the previous findings of group flow being harder to achieve when the dancers did not know each other well, and low-flow groups were often mimicking and doing simpler movements (Łuczniak & May, 2021).

When experiencing Flow, it is possible that gender may have a role in who can experience Flow easier and how it can be accomplished. According to this study published in the *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2020, “significant gender differences exist regarding personality and flow. In this study, females were higher on Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. . . while males scored higher on Agreeableness” (Annalakshmi et al., 2020, p. 222). The study also noted that societal influences could have influenced these results, for example, how young women are often taught to be dutiful and agreeable for fear of consequences from other people. The study later noted that the Agreeableness feature was not significantly different for either gender, and it was important to both genders tested. This study also noted that according to their findings, “adolescent females were higher on flow state as well as dispositional flow and tend to experience greater levels of flow compared to males” (Annalakshmi et al., 2020, p. 223). This is another area of Flow that requires more research, and to see how societal pressures and influences may be affecting the results, especially when researching adolescent girls.

One extremely new way to test creativity and Flow is by using virtual reality. While participants were wearing virtual reality headsets, “brainwave equipment was used to monitor and record the brain state in the activity in order to provide accurate data to understand the creative process of the participants” (Yang et al., 2019, p. 867). Participants were given an open-

ended task and they had to accomplish it in whatever manner they saw fit in five minutes, testing their creativity and problem-solving skills. This was to attempt to bring up a State of Flow and see how such triggers of a task and a timer influenced that state. Such methods and testing would not have been accessible to the mainstream fifteen or twenty years ago, and “every new generation, or even every few years, if the conditions in which we live change that rapidly—it becomes necessary to rethink and reformulate what it takes to establish autonomy in consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 22). As time goes on and technology rapidly evolves, both for testing and for entertainment and media, the methods we use to analyze the brain and how creativity and State of Flow is accessed must evolve alongside it.

How Flow is Different in Neurodivergent Brains

During the research of this paper, an important distinction had to be made between Flow and hyperfocus. Hyperfocus is often a symptom of many mental illnesses like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, and schizophrenia, and it is often thought to be related to being in Flow. However, there is discussion of whether they are their own separate concepts, or if they are so intertwined into each other that they can be interchangeable terms. One operational definition of hyperfocus proposed is composed of four parts:

(1) to engage in hyperfocus, the task has to be engaging (i.e., fun, interesting, important, etc.). (2) Hyperfocus is characterized by an intense state of sustained or selective attention. (3) When engaged in hyperfocus, there is a diminished perception of non-task relevant stimuli. (4) During a hyperfocus state, task performance improves. (Ashinoff & Abu-Akel, 2021, p.14)

The authors believe that with this definition of hyperfocus, it is identical to Flow as we know it and they were studied in two separate fields of psychology and called two different things

(Ashinoff & Abu-Akel, 2021). However, Grotewiel et al. (2022) found “these results suggest either that hyperfocus and flow are distinct, inversely related constructs, or that the wording of the questionnaire items influence responders to think of their experiences or task absorption differently” (p. 1). This also relates to the previous study, with participants not knowing the difference between hyperfocus and Flow themselves, and only knowing how it feels for them and their terms for those feelings. This makes future research on the connection between these two phenomena difficult because to gather data from participants on their Flow or their hyperfocus, they may not necessarily know the difference, if there is a difference to explore in the first place. Much like the difference between State of Flow and yoga, it is yet to be determined if they are the same concept or if they are opposites. For a disorder such as ADHD, it is not always the attention span that is the apparent symptom, but rather the inability to control the focus needed on tasks that are important to them and regulate their emotions as such. Another point from a different article is that “The paradoxical experience of hyperfocus by individuals with ADHD- a disorder typically characterized by a deficit in attention – has only recently started to be empirically examined” (Ayers-Glassey & MacIntyre, 2021, para. 28). If participants in future ADHD and Flow or hyperfocus studies are already showing difficulty with retaining attention, then their studies would be more beneficial to the parties involved as it would expand our knowledge of mental cognition and attention, as well as better understand the executive functioning ability of those participants. When looking at the executive function of children with ADHD, and seeing if their diagnosis affected their processing speed, Kofler et al. (2020) found “working memory abilities impact children’s information processing speed, but that working memory and slowed information processing speed are likely independent impairments in ADHD” (p. 127). With the pre-established conscious mind processing speed being fifty bits per

second, this shows that people with ADHD, especially children, do not suffer from any processing speed differences than neurotypical people, and that their processing speed while in Flow should remain the same as well.

State of Flow in Mainstream Media

The concept of State of Flow has been seen in the mainstream media of today. A Disney movie called *Soul*, released in 2020, explores Flow through the lens of a jazz musician named Joe. A few minutes into the film, Joe tells his middle school band students that his first experience with jazz was visiting a jazz club as a teenager and watching the musicians on stage, and saying “And I swear, the next thing I know...it’s like he floats off the stage. That guy was lost in the music, he was in it, and he took the rest of us with him” (Doctor, 2020, 02:11). As he is saying this, he starts to get lost in his own playing of the piano, until he is interrupted and, bringing him out of his Flow. Flow is manifested in the film by showing the physical surroundings fading to black, and then only showing Joe in a dark space often highlighted by hues of blue and purple, and shapes dancing around to his playing, showing he is completely unaware of the outside world as he plays, and is completely immersed in his art. When playing with a new band for the first time in the movie, it takes a few moments for him to get into the rhythm given by the other band members’ lead rhythms, and even other instruments fade out of the song and all the audience hears is the piano that Joe is playing until he comes out of Flow to see the other musicians staring at him, and leading him to say “Uh, sorry. I zoned out a little bit there” (Doctor, 2020, 08:22), as he realizes he was in Flow. The use of the wording “zone out” implies that Joe was in Flow but was using terminology that was referring to an alpha brainwave state. Later in the movie, Joe arrives in a purgatory-like environment, and after getting to the Great Before, a new soul, named 22, shows Joe an actual Flow zone, and directly showcases all

sorts of different activities that are being done while in Flow including acting, tattooing, and being an athlete. Other activities are shown in the background like dancing, singing, swimming, skiing, and riding a bicycle (Doctor, 2020). A very common thread with these activities is most of them are relating to movement. The brain becomes immersed in the movement from the body and allows the rest of the surroundings to fade and become completely immersed in the task. At the end of the movie, Joe gets to play in the band of his dreams, and 22, his companion throughout most of the movie, is pulled back into the Great Before. Joe, upset for his friend, purposely enters a Flow state to get back into that world, and try to help his friend, all the while becoming more at peace with himself, what the purpose of his life is, and where it is heading. This could also be a veiled inference of using Flow to make oneself happier and more accepting of themselves, which is aligned with the Positive Psychology aspect of using State of Flow in daily life to have a healthier and happier mental state. Whether that was intentional by the development and writing teams is unclear.

Expressive Arts therapist Mitchell Kossak, LMHC, REAT is also a jazz musician and uses jazz to relate to his practice and his patients. Using free jazz, also known as improvised or non-structured jazz, as a template:

free musical improvisation used by professional musicians and free improvisations used in clinical therapy practice reflect many similarities. As noted both employ a methodology that helps to create the experience of relational connectivity and attunement to self, other, group (community), and a sense of the transcendent, through experimentation, interpersonal collaboration, a need for deep listening, and learning how to stay with unpredictable states. (Kossak, 2008, para. 34)

Using jazz music seems to be a fitting analogy to therapy, especially group Expressive Therapy settings, as it is a type of music that requires people to work together, to actively listen, and allows a space to learn how to provide an individual with their own space to play with the music, while they can also make mistakes without ruining the music being made by the group. Because using jazz as a therapeutic tool does not produce music to be heard by the masses, there is an extra awareness to play what feels right to the group, and not be worried about technical ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ playing, especially if the group playing together is made up of people who are not trained musicians (Kossak, 2008).

Flow in Other Dance/Movement Therapy Frameworks

When researching Dance/Movement Therapy and movement frameworks in general to include, it became increasingly necessary to address Laban Movement Analysis. LMA is widely regarded as a pillar of Dance/Movement Therapy, however:

It is a tale of how systemic racism affects the very way in which a system, in this case LMA, is held up as the paragon of ways of organizing movement concepts and analyzing movement above all other cultural systems of understanding movement. (Davis et al., 2021, p. 7)

As societal and cultural awareness of systemic racism and oppression grows and is then dismantled, LMA does not escape the modern-day reassessment of its teachings. Looking at LMA “we must reveal LMA’s xenophobic and subjugating histories, while continuing to explore its concepts in dialectic ways that do not perpetuate unwitting tyranny” (Davis et al., 2021, p. 7). LMA does reference a type of flow, as a motion factor of precision (Moore, 2014). The quality of flow in LMA is referring to the amount of tension in one’s body while moving. Bound flow has the capacity to stop at any time, while free flow is forced to follow through on a movement

(Bradley, 2018). When categorizing movement using LMA, there are multiple categories of efforts to be considered, and they are all paired together to categorize a movement or movement phrase, as “efforts tend to occur, stylistically, in pairs (called States), and in threes (called Drives). States are read as moods; while Drives are fully loaded moments of full expressivity” (Bradley, 2018, p. 102). This quality of flow, combined with other efforts and qualities, make up the system of Laban Movement Analysis as we know it today. This is not only used for dancers, but also other for athletes, actors, and also musicians.

When looking at current Dance/Movement Therapy frameworks to introduce State of Flow to, it is easy to think of the tension-flow rhythms of Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP). While tension-flow rhythms and State of Flow are not referring to the same Csikszentmihalyi definition of Flow, KMP defines it as

tension changes which occur in regular or irregular intervals and serve need satisfaction. Rhythms of tension-flow are used to express various ranges of pleasure and displeasure and are observable in ten developmentally based patterns: sucking, biting, twisting, straining, running, stopping/starting, undulating, swaying, jumping and leaping. (Loman, 1998, p. 104)

With this definition of flow, KMP focuses on natural movement that presents itself from birth, and how these different kinds of movement develop as a child grows physically, emotionally, and mentally. KMP also focuses on learning about one’s past through movement and showing one’s experiences being stored in the body. Using a State of Flow with this framework would acknowledge the past of one’s body and connecting that to the brain, as well as acknowledge the memories of the brain and express them through the body. While analyzing movement through the lens of KMP, “different qualities of rhythmic movements can elicit different affective

experiences in adults” (Johnson, 2018, p. 95). KMP also sees much use with pregnant people, proposing “attunement and fetal movement notation could be used to identify those expectant mothers who have difficulty relating nonverbally to their fetuses” (Loman, 2016, p. 242).

The last framework to be explored is Body-Mind Centering (BMC). BMC offers more of an anatomical approach to dance and movement, focusing on different bodily systems as their own individual processes. The body systems outlined in BMC are skeletal, ligamentous, muscular, organs, endocrine, nervous, fluid, facial, fat, and skin (Bainbridge Cohen, 1999, pp. 2-4). It also includes “breathing and vocalization; the senses and the dynamics of perception; developmental movement (both human infant development and the evolutionary progression through the animal kingdom); and psychophysical integration” (Bainbridge Cohen, 2012, p. 2). This framework places extreme emphasis on the default working state of the body, and integrating the mind to the body, rather than the body to the mind. When looking at the body through the BMC framework, the body is constantly in a state of Flow, matching Csikszentmihalyi’s definition of complete and sustained immersion in an activity. In the organ system, the heart is constantly beating and working to the best of its ability, and not getting distracted or taken out of Flow to do any other tasks. The body is constantly moving and working, even when it is purposefully not being moved or active, and BMC acknowledges that in the most comprehensive way of the frameworks being analyzed.

Discussion

State of Flow, a definition provided by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is the complete immersion in a task, where the brain is only focusing on that task, and nothing else matters. While not a new to him concept, his definition is the one that current research is built on, including research being done today with ever-evolving technologies and experimentations. As

alternative therapies get more mainstream and accessible to the public, they are often subjected to ridicule and not a full understanding of the benefits they may have to the people that try them. On the other side of the coin, Flow representation in mainstream media makes people aware of the power of the brain to be focused on a singular task, whether it is artistic or otherwise important and engaging, and the peak mental performance that it is capable of. When looking at frameworks to integrate the concept of State of Flow into Dance/Movement Therapy, Body-Mind Centering seems the most applicable given its pre-existing emphasis on the natural Flow of the body and the focus on each system's job. Flow could likely be integrated into any framework of Dance/Movement Therapy with time and effort, but when already explaining the anatomy of the complex bodily systems and their natural ability to constantly be working for the benefit of the host like BMC does, the mental immersion is the final step to complete bodily State of Flow. Using Body-Mind Centering to contextualize natural bodily flow to someone with no prior knowledge, or has a limited amount of experience due to hearing about a concept of flow through other avenues of exploration, can start by reflecting the body's natural peak state of constant work and connecting that to the neural State of Flow. When looking at the body as an interconnected vessel that is in a constant State of Flow to provide the body a state of homeostasis, using the same concept for setting the brain in Flow and aim for peak performance while doing a task will be easier to understand. When explaining the topics for this thesis to friends and family, I would use that approach to explain State of Flow and how it relates to psychology, and it was beneficial for them to have that prior context. The importance of full immersion in a task is also something that should be emphasized more in movement and Dance/Movement Therapy, especially when moving with a group for the first time and as the group develops together. When moving in front of others, whether familiar or strangers, there is

always trepidation, and it is one of the first major hurdles to get over when starting movement or Dance/Movement Therapy journeys and exercises. When moving individually, a mover can feel like they are being watched and can also feel uncomfortable if moving by themselves with just the therapist or rest of the group present and watching. A pillar of therapy, both for traditional talk therapy and Expressive Arts Therapy, is to create a safe space where anything can be explored, expressed, or talked about, and focusing on a full immersion on the subject(s) and movements that come up are key to getting used to a movement space, regardless of the frameworks being used during a session. A prompt such as “only look into what you are doing, not anybody else, and immerse yourself in your own movement” would prompt a mover to look inwards into their movement, and not outwards towards their environment and external stimulations. A mover, or a group of movers, initiating Flows together would be able to build trust with each other, the therapist, and the space, and help build the safe space while they focus on their own movements and feel any judgements they may be inherently imagining. While using a Body-Mind Centering framework with special considerations to State of Flow would benefit the framework, Flow could also be the center of its own framework. Using State of Flow as a basis for a Dance/Movement Therapy framework will also have the movers regularly experience and recognize their own Flow State, and they could then transition those practices to their daily lives outside of therapy sessions and be aware of the optimal experiences. If they are aware of how to trigger their personal State of Flow when in the safe and non-judgmental space of a therapy session, then they can implement it into their daily life and for any task they seek to do. There is a gap in the current literature to support having State of Flow being its own framework, and I am anticipating implementing and evolving these strategies as well as the

concept of State of Flow into my own practices in the near future, both for myself and also for whomever would be seeking treatments with me.

An enormously discussed topic in the current Expressive Arts Therapy communities is that more research always needs to be done, especially with people who are neurodivergent and suffer from attention disorders, as their experience with Flow may be different than people who are neurotypical. Csikszentmihalyi once wrote “the task of the next decades and centuries is to realize this under-developed component of the brain” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 240), and I believe that today’s research and experimentation is doing just that. Further implementing his theory into Dance/Movement Therapy will only expand our knowledge of how Flow works in the brain and in the body, and how we can use it to our benefits through life. Researching State of Flow more accurately with newer technologies and methods, including heuristic methods, can help determine how individualized this state of mind is, and separate it from other concepts like alpha brainwave state and hyperfocus. Furthering the research being done today in the arts and in therapy will bridge the disconnect between the mind and the body and provide a whole self to move through space and life.

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