

I Feel Life in This: An Introduction for the General Reader

This thesis was written as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Humanistic Psychology at the University of West Georgia in 2015. A number of people were kind enough to ask to read my thesis, so I am republishing it on my website SilkRoadConjectures.com.

Humanistic psychology is referred to as the “third wave” of psychology and though its roots are much deeper, it came together as a sub-field in the 1960s and '70s. In brief, humanistic psychology views human beings as complete, complex individuals. We are complicated creatures who could only exist as we do in the particular time, place and culture we have experienced. Human beings are not just a brain with a diagnosis attached and our bodies *do* more and *mean* more than being just sacks of meat to haul our brain around.

One of the critical insights of humanistic psychology is a turning away from the demands of the ‘natural sciences’ that have held sway intellectually for the past 400 years or so. All modern sciences tend to try to use the standards of the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, mathematics etc) to study human experience. Unfortunately, the worldview of the natural sciences is to ignore or deny anything that cannot be externally observed, measured and judged. For physics, astronomy, mathematics and the like, this is a reasonable position to take. But to take that view towards human beings is to systematically ignore much of which makes us human at all, especially the variation in human consciousness.

So humanistic psychology sees itself as being a real science, but as being a fundamentally *human* science that requires access to more data than can be gathered from a purely external perspective. Humanistic psychology also values the variability and uniqueness of human experience instead of looking for the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ or ‘average’ condition and measuring all other experiences as if normality were the fundamental goal of human accomplishment and everything that does not qualify as normal is somehow lacking or wrong or unacceptable. One of my favorite things about the amazing psychology department at UWG is the recurring refrain, “Normal? Yeah, normal is a setting on my washing machine.”

The goal of a thesis is to fill an existing hole in the research in your chosen field. I have been passionate about dance and music for my entire life and have observed the transformational aspects of creativity in myself and others as well. So with the guidance of Dr. Christine Simmonds-Moore, possibly the most amazing thesis adviser ever, I began exploring the variety of dance and music experience both from a psychological perspective and a cross-cultural one.

It's very common for people to experience ‘altered states of consciousness’ during everyday activities and it appears that these states are good for us: for managing stress, for

alternate ways of processing experience and solving problems, to facilitate cooperation and community feeling and just for relaxation and enjoyment. One of the more common altered states of consciousness can occur when you are driving. I've never talked to anyone who drives who has not experienced getting in their car, beginning to think of something else or nothing at all, and who is suddenly conscious of being at their destination with no clear memory of how they got there.

When I came to UWG, I was exposed to the work of writers such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and Victor Frankl. They all come from the position that we do not strive to be normal or ordinary; we strive to fulfill our unique potential and to live a happy life that has meaning for ourselves and for the people around us. One of the qualities of a fulfilling life is the occurrence of 'peak experiences'. Descriptions of 'peak experiences' sounded very familiar to me; these states frequently exist for me when I dance, listen to music and do other creative activities.

The idea of 'peak experiences' led me to the work of Mihaly Csikszentihalyi. (During my defense, I told my committee that I shouldn't be allowed to graduate until I could spell his name without thinking about it. They laughed at me, and said they were willing to waive that requirement). Csikszentihalyi was the first person to identify what he called 'the flow state', which is a state of being fully engaged in whatever is happening in the present moment and working to the outside limits of your skills. You are doing something that you are intrinsically motivated to do and you have an altered experience of the passage of time; time seems to either compress or expand. This is an inherently positive, enjoyable state and frequent experience of this state carries a whole raft of positive benefits.

But a thesis is supposed to fill a 'hole' in the research. The positive benefits of the flow state is very well studied; so are the types of situations or tasks that are conducive to the flow state. We know a lot about the type of personality that allows individuals to experience the flow state and we know that their performance improves when they are in the flow state. We know that people who frequently experience the flow state are much more likely to achieve mastery in their chosen activity.

What has not been clearly established is how you deliberately enter that state on your own, how you maintain it, or fix it if it is disrupted and how you systematically teach others how to reach it.

That is what my thesis sets out to do. This type of research has a necessarily narrow focus and so I chose to closely examine the experiences of experienced improvisational musicians and dancers. I examined how often they experience flow, how they control it and how they attempt or would attempt to teach others to experience flow.

I'm very pleased with the outcome of my thesis and I'm looking forward to putting what I have learned into practice. If you read this and have any experiences you would like to share, or if you would like to possibly be interviewed for a forthcoming book on the transformational aspects of music and dance, please write to me. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them, so ask away.

The thesis is reproduced here as it was published by my university through the ProQuest database, with one exception. My department required that I include the complete transcriptions of the interviews I conducted with the research participants. The six participants were very forthcoming during their interviews and some of the subjects they covered are quite sensitive. Out of respect for my participants, I have chosen to not include the full transcripts in this version that is posted publicly. However, each participant is quoted extensively within the text of the thesis. All transcripts and the chart of meaning units referenced in the text have been removed and I have added [redacted] each time they are mentioned so you don't go searching for something that is not included.

I want to thank my participants for their time, expertise and trust. This research could not have been done without them.

I want to warn those of you that don't read academic writing very often: the style of writing required is very specific. We write in the third person and the language is quite formal. The use of terminology is very specific and sometimes words that are used casually in normal conversation have very specific meanings when used in an academic context. All the terms are defined and explained in the text and I hope they are useful for a general reader.

However, I would welcome any questions you may have. Chances are, you aren't the only person to have the question. Asking questions allows me to clarify my writing and make it more useful. I may use your questions as a jumping-off point for a blog post or as a way to edit my writing to make it clearer and more useful.

I have been overwhelmed with people's interest in reading this work and I hope that it proves useful. Thank you so much for taking the time to read it.

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I FEEL LIFE IN THIS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE CREATION,
MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR OF THE FLOW STATE IN IMPROVISATIONAL
MUSICIANS AND DANCERS

by

LEA C. BENSON

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of West Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
for the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Humanistic Psychology

CARROLLTON, GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT

LEA C. BENSON: I Feel Life in This: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Creation, Maintenance and Repair of the Flow State in Improvisational Musicians and Dancers
(Under the direction of Dr. Christine Simmonds-Moore)

The flow state is an altered state of consciousness that occurs during many activities and has positive effects on mental and physical health and increases the potential for self-actualization and high achievement in the activity during which it is experienced. While the flow state has been carefully documented and described, there is still limited understanding of the specific skills that allow the flow state to be entered into at will, maintained, and repaired if it is disrupted. This study uses Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to explore several understudied aspects of the flow state. The flow state is a state of effortless concentration in which the subject is working to the limits of his or her skills. Participants in this study reported a distorted sense of the passage of time as well as positive emotions such as feelings of euphoria, and religious or spiritual ecstasy. The ability to experience the flow state has been shown to have a strong correlation with the achievement of mastery in the activity that causes the flow state. Maslow, Csikszentmihalyi (1997), Frankl (1968) and others have identified the flow state as a peak experience, critical to the process of self-actualization. What research has not revealed is a consistent means by which individuals may be taught how to enter and maintain the flow state, as well as how to repair a disrupted state of flow.

Six experienced improvisational musicians and dancers were interviewed using semi-structured, open-ended techniques with the purpose of discovering the skills they use to manage

the flow state so that a system might be developed to give access to the flow state to anyone who desires it. Eight major themes emerged from the data: Phenomenology/Experience, Family/Cultural Issues, Creating Flow, Response to Academic Conceptions of Flow, Use of Mind-altering Substances, Disruption, Transformation, and Teaching Flow.

Participants were able to identify specific physical environments, social structures and mental skills that allowed them to enter into and control the flow state. While some aspects of flow are consistent across all activities, other aspects have been found to be specific to the activity in which the flow state occurs. The results of this study point the way towards a systematic method of teaching individuals to access the flow state and its benefits.

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Alec Knudson, my parents Dan J. Benson, Wanda Merk and Charles B. Merk, and my grandmother, Bonnie Drake for their support, love and courage. I am so deeply grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project could not have been completed without the help, support, and feedback from many people. I am indebted to my thesis chair, Dr. Christine Simmonds-Moore, Assistant Professor of Psychology and the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Christopher Aanstoos, Professor of Psychology and Dr. Carol Gingerich, Associate Professor of Music, Piano and Piano Pedagogy, all at the University of West Georgia. Their support, feedback, and passion were more than I ever hoped for.

James Williams, Tahya Smith and Wanda Merk were critical in their role as transcribers, this could not have been done without them.

The research participants, Carla Monnich, Ted Monnich, Tamara Nicolai, Farzad Farhangi, Jennifer Imashev and 'K' were incredibly generous with their time, trust, expertise, passion and wisdom.

In addition, Dr. Donadrian Rice, Psychology Department Chair at the University of West Georgia, Dr. Kathleen Skott-Myhre, Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of West Georgia and Dr. Hans Skott-Myre, Associate Professor of Social Sciences at Brock University were of inestimable value in helping me discover and understand critical areas of the field of psychology. Dr. Heidi Lyn, Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi, and Dr. Heather Mbaye, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of West Georgia also provided crucial expertise and guidance to the academic environment.

I am profoundly grateful to them all for their precious gifts of time, help and guidance.

PREFACE

I have been a life-long student of dance. In my teens, I began to focus on traditional forms of dance, particularly Classical Persian Dance. This is an improvisational form and draws a great deal of its expressive style from Sufism and Sufi poetry. Sufism is the mystical arm of Islam, focusing on a direct experience of the Divine instead of a reliance on the written word.

I have been teaching and performing Classical Persian Dance for over 25 years. I also teach several styles of Central Asian Dance. I have immersed myself in traditional dance styles from around the world including North and West Africa, Turkey, the Arabian Peninsula, Spain, India, and Bali.

I have been very fortunate to experience dance most frequently and powerfully in community with live musicians. Many musicians over the years have supported my growth as a dancer as well as my exploration of music. The artistic communities in which I have spent the most time are deeply communal and supportive and that has been of crucial value in my growth as an artist, a scholar, and an individual.

Over a decade ago I began to receive requests from students to teach improvisation and the transformative aspects of dance, in addition to technique. My entry into the graduate program in the Humanistic Psychology Program at the University of West Georgia has allowed me to explore the academic literature on the benefits of a life filled with music and dance as well as the use of artistic endeavors as pathways to peak experiences and self-actualization. My personal history and observation of other artists has also led me to acknowledge the transformative aspects of dance and music beyond simple benefits such as personal enjoyment

and the reduction in stress. I firmly believe that the academic work done by psychologists and related fields provides the framework for new and practical applications to give individuals the opportunity to radically improve their lives and their communities.

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Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon under study is called the ‘flow state’ and has been defined in the literature as a beneficial altered state of consciousness in which the individual is fully focused on the present moment, acting with focused intention and intrinsic motivation. The individual is working to the limits of their skills, performing at a higher skill level than in normal states of consciousness and experiencing a distorted sense of time. This state of consciousness has been recognized as occurring in many types of activities including work activities such as mathematics, computer programming and writing, athletics, the arts and other forms of leisure. Certain individuals are more likely to experience the flow state than others and there is a measurable positive benefit in areas such as achievement, stress management and self-esteem.

Because the flow state is a predictor of achievement, there has been a great deal of study in industry, athletics and professional creative endeavors. Research has revealed the types of individuals and environments where flow is likely to occur, but it has been less successful in describing the skill set necessary to voluntarily enter the flow state, maintain or repair it, and help others to achieve it for themselves.

The flow state is a large phenomenon and some aspects such as those listed above appear to be constant regardless of the activity in which flow is achieved. However, it is likely that some aspects of a flow state experience and skill set are determined by the activity in which it occurs.

The purpose of this paper is both to clarify at least some of the necessary skills for controlling flow that are generally applicable, and to explore the elements of the flow state’s

attendant skill set within the confines of improvisational music and dance. The flow state is widely documented to occur in many creative endeavors in addition to music and dance. The flow state is also experienced during music and dance that is not improvised. The choice to explore the flow state within music and dance is determined partly by the author's experience of improvisational music and dance, and access to individuals with a great deal of experience in these artistic forms. In addition, more individuals worldwide have exposure to non-classical forms of music and dance in which instruction is based less on formalized procedures and more on individual instruction and learning 'by ear' or observation. The author has a particular interest in traditional and indigenous art forms and so has chosen to focus on those forms instead of on formalized classical music and dance which have been more extensively explored in the literature.

Chapter II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of the flow state began in earnest in the 1960s, and has accelerated and broadened in the last half-century. However, it has its roots in philosophical inquiry into individual experiences by authors such as Heidegger (1996) and Merleau-Ponty (1964). The psychological literature examines the flow state from several different perspectives. The literature explored such themes as the definition of the flow state as compared to other states of consciousness; the various physical, mental and social benefits; the type and structure of activities that are likely to lead to the flow state; the type of individuals who are more or less likely to experience the flow state, as well as the challenges of assisting individuals who wish to experience the flow state but have not been able to enter it themselves.

Since World War II, psychology has focused on healing pathology through a disease model of the human psyche. “This almost exclusive attention to pathology neglects the fulfilled individual and the thriving community” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5). Beginning in the late 1960s, a “third way” of psychology emerged, defined by Carl Rogers (1964), Abraham Maslow (1943, 1971), Viktor Frankl (1968) and others. This turn away from the natural science approaches of both behaviorism and cognitive neuroscience shifted the focus toward what is best in human nature. Frankl (1968) contended that all human experience is directed towards a search for meaning.

Whatever the personal origins of our conviction that the time has arrived for a positive psychology, our message is to remind our field that psychology is not just the study of

weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best. Psychology is not just a branch of medicine concerned with illness or health; it is much larger. It is about work, education, insight, love, growth and play. And in this quest for what is best, positive psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, faith, self-deception, fads or hand-waving; it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents to those who wish to understand it in all its complexity. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.7)

This ‘third way’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7) of approaching human experience re-orientes us towards a positive view of psychology and human potential and the drive for self-actualization (Rogers 1965). The flow state falls into the category of peak experiences described by Maslow (1943) as necessary for self-actualization.

What is the Flow State?

During the 1960s and 70s, work by Rogers, Maslow, Frankl and others began to include an emphasis on the experiences of the body in addition to the purely verbal (Aanstoos, 2015). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991) was one of the first researchers to clearly define and focus on the flow state. He defined it as an effortless concentration and enjoyment and a disruption of the passage of time. Those experiencing this state have described it as ‘being in the zone’, religious ‘ecstasy’ or an ‘aesthetic rapture’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p 46). It is a state of consciousness that is different from, more fulfilling than, ‘happiness’ based on external conditions. The flow state is dependent upon intrinsic motivation and is therefore a tool for a good and happy life because it is controlled by the individual instead of outside factors. Flow is best entered in

situations with “clear goals that require appropriate responses” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 49). These goals provide immediate feedback.

“Flow also happens when a person’s skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable, so it acts as a magnet for learning new skills and increasing challenges. If challenges are too low, one gets back to flow by increasing them. If challenges are too great, one can return to the flow state by learning new skills.”

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.47)

One of the critical requirements of flow is that the person’s skills be appropriately matched with the challenges of the situation. If the challenges are low compared to the skills available, the result is relaxation or boredom. If the challenges are too high, frustration or anxiety are the result (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Blackett and Payne (2005) in particular posit a “match theory” which is that the demand of the task and an individual’s ability must be well matched for flow to occur.

Eunkung’s (2013) work on active procrastination among academic high achievers indicates that a significant number of these high achievers engage in “active procrastination used with flow and self-regulated learning” to regulate the challenge-skill balance (p.1099).

However, the flow state is acknowledged as being a variable individual experience that changes across time in intensity, complexity and other factors. (Csikszentmihalyi 1989; Ceja & Navarro 2009; Kawabata, 2011). Ceja and Navarro (2009) explore the use of chaos theory to understand the flow state. They posit that individuals are less predictable in positive emotional states than negative and as the flow state is by definition positive, that flow includes chaotic states and moves in a non-linear fashion.

In his work on attunement in rhythmic improvisation, Kossak (2008) identifies ten ‘stages’ of engagement that, to this author, do not constitute stages, but rather elements.

These elements include: “warming up to space and sounds, seeking safety, experimentation, risk taking and vulnerability, experiences of chaotic states or misattunement, entrainment or merging, embodied shifts in consciousness, intersubjective empathy, flow, and shared intimacy where research participants reported a sense of interconnected unity with something greater than self, similar to peak or unitive states of consciousness.” (p. ii)

The use of the term ‘stages’ suggests a linear process that the individual would go through in a uni-directional way. Instead, the existing literature, the responses of the research participants and the author’s own experiences all indicate a process that is recursive, non-linear and chaotic.

How is it Beneficial?

The flow state is a beneficial experience for individuals from a mental health perspective as well as having positive influence on physical health and social behavior. In addition to being inherently pleasurable, the flow state can lead toward self-actualization, increased self-esteem and personal complexity, as well as enhanced mood. The flow state experienced in a group setting leads to increased prosocial behavior. Physically, it reduces stress, anxiety and mood disturbance. Generally speaking, a frequent experience of the flow state improves quality of life.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) wrote that positive experiences occur when individuals believe that they have opportunities for action that are matched with personal capacity. Not only is this state inherently pleasurable, it also develops new skills and increases both personal complexity and self-esteem. Individuals who experience this skill/challenge balance report that they feel

more energetic, focused, creative and happier than during activities that do not optimally balance challenge and personal skills. (Csikszentmihalyi 1997)

Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (1943) states that individuals need "a firmly based, (usually) high evaluation of themselves for self-respect, or self-esteem of others. By firmly based self-esteem, we mean that which is soundly based upon real capacity, achievement and respect from others" (p. 381). The flow state leads to an increase in skills to meet the demands of the task, which leads to increased self-esteem.

Maslow (1943) insists that, once more basic needs are met: A new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization... This tendency might be phrased more as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (p.382).

In addition to issues of self-actualization, group states of flow have the capacity to increase prosocial behavior. Kokal, Engel and Keysers (2011) conducted a study in which drumming in synchrony was found to increase pro-social behavior among participants especially with regard to cooperation. However, when a confederate in the study deliberately drummed out of time with the rest of the group, the individuals' willingness to cooperate with that person dropped dramatically. The study also found a significant correlation between the ease with which a participant was able to reproduce the rhythm and their pro-social behavior toward their co-musician who played in synchrony. The study refers to rhythms which 'come easily', but in this author's experience, any rhythm played by a beginner is challenging simply because playing at a steady tempo is all the skills-challenge necessary.

A study of adolescents by Coholic (2011) explored the effect of mindfulness, a key component of flow, as an arts based intervention. The author chose to use arts-based intervention as a way to gain the children's co-operation because the arts are viewed as pleasurable experiences. Children and parents reported positive increases in emotional regulation, self-awareness, self-esteem, social interactions, patience and compassion.

DeManzano, Theorell, Harmat and Ullen (2010) used piano playing by experts to induce the flow state and analyzed psychophysiological measures and their correlation to the flow state. The study found a significant correlation between the flow state and measures of "heart period, blood pressure, heart rate variability, activity of the zygomaticus major muscle, and respiratory depth" (p.301).

Flow has proven to be beneficial to individuals across the life span. Hirao, Kobayashi and Yabuwaki (2012) used experience sampling to collect data on a community of elderly Japanese. Not only did groups who regularly experience either the flow state or relaxation (high skills, low challenge) have better physical health than apathetic or depressed groups but it was the experience of flow that was important, not the duration of flow.

Benefits of Music, Dance and Improvisation

Participation in music and dance has an impressive literature supporting physical and mental health benefits. Schneer's (1994) work on movement improvisation lists some of the benefits of improvisational dance as increased confidence, release of stress, and a feeling of safety to be authentic. She deliberately creates a space for improvisational groups in which emotions are expressed with the body, not words. She claims that this creates a space where it is not necessary or expected to verbalize, explain or justify what the body has expressed. Self-reliance is increased by the practice of having one's own judgment be 'enough'. Increased

powers of observation outside of class, and observing and interpreting others' non-verbal communication are cited as effects of this improvisational practice. She posits that increased trust within the group can lead to increased self-confidence elsewhere. In her improvisation classes, students are always allowed to say 'no' to an activity. They report that this leads to increased assertiveness in the rest of their lives, because they have had practice preserving their boundaries first in a safe space.

Blackett and Payne (2005) used group drumming and experience of the flow state as an adjunct therapeutic technique for adults with substance abuse problems. The experience of a group flow state was identified as pleasurable and therapeutic, and increased program attendance and retention rates. Another study evaluated the positive effect of group music therapy on nursing home residents (Mohammadi, Shahabi & Panah, 2011). Researchers measured changes in stress, anxiety and depression after group musical activities. The study did not look at the phenomenology of the experience, just the measurable aspects, so it is impossible to know if any of the participants achieved a flow state. But it does link some of the same benefits of the flow state to participation in musical activities.

The book *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Goldman, 2010) takes a critical approach toward the practice of improvised dance, referencing Foucault. The concept of freedom is explored and the idea that all bodies are bound by their history in space and time and thus cannot be devoid of restraint. Words, and the people who control them, are traditionally privileged above the ineffable, the ephemeral, the mute, and the silenced. Dance is suggested as a method for side-stepping the verbal as a means of external control. Dance is conceived as having power as a process rather than a product that can be co-opted by the dominant culture.

Slepian and Ambady (2012) examine the link between fluid movement and creativity. Their study indicates that fluid movements of the body result in more creative idea generation and cognitive flexibility. The results of the study were quite simple and clear, which indicates to this author that caution is required. Other studies seem to indicate that rhythmic movement increases focus and lifts mood. However, this is the first study the author has found that seeks to make such correlations with fluid movement.

During What Activities?

When the flow state was identified, Csikszentmihalyi and others assumed that due to factors such as the need for intrinsic motivation, most flow experiences would occur during leisure hours. However, Csikszentmihalyi's 1989 study utilizing the Experience Sampling Method showed that flow occurred three times more frequently during work activities than leisure. He cites multiple studies indicating that both teens and adults spend more leisure time in less enjoyable activities such as watching TV versus more enjoyable and challenging activities. Cultural expectations of work as inherently unpleasant may be at play, as well as the need for unchallenging or relaxing activities to counter the challenging activities of work. This study showed that managers spent significantly more time at work in the flow state than non-managers, 64% versus 51-47%. This may well reflect the greater challenges of managerial work as well as greater individual control allowed compared to blue collar and clerical workers. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). Ceja and Navarro (2009) also looked at the strong link between flow and work activities.

Mauri's (2011) study of Facebook use indicated not only that the flow state occurs frequently among users of the popular social networking site, but that there were measurable differences in the level and intensity of flow.

The two domains in which the flow state has most carefully been studied are the arts and athletics. People who experience the flow state have been determined to be more likely to achieve skills mastery because the flow state itself is a reward for practice (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). Typically when improvisation research is done for jazz solo musicians, in addition to recording, scoring and other measurements, the musician is asked about his or her internal process. The musician is able to describe multiple aspects or phases of the improvisational process including creating a long or short term 'plan', engaging in self-monitoring and alteration of the given plan as new information or inspiration becomes available. (Rogers, S.E., 2013)

Hefferon and Ollis (2006) conducted an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] of flow experiences of dancers in a variety of forms. IPA involves conducting detailed interviews that are examined both for common themes and distinguishing characteristics. This form of inquiry attempts to illuminate individual experience as opposed to external, observable data. They observed that in spite of the attention paid by researchers to the flow state in both music and sports, little work has been done specifically on dancers. They conclude that dance has specific elements that can increase or decrease flow.

In-depth interviews of students attending an advanced school for the arts in Singapore also showed strong evidence of the experience of flow including a distorted sense of the passage of time, joy, and intrinsic motivation among the gifted teenagers when they practiced their art forms. (Garces-Bacsal, Cohen & Tan, 2011)

Glăveanu (2012) is one of the first investigators to use personal, body-worn cameras to record the artistic process from the point of view of the artist. Each camera is able to indicate direction of focus and eye-movement as the participant is actively creating art. This study of non-professional practitioners of the Eastern European art of Easter egg decoration (*pysanky*)

directly contradicts the idea that ‘folk art’ is not ‘real’ art or ‘real’ creativity. The article describes in detail the experience of designing and painting the eggs in a complex, multi-step process. The artisans describe experiences of flow in which they are submerged in the process of creating a unique product using their cultural knowledge of traditional aesthetics. Most of the artisans work on the eggs only seasonally, but look forward to the group experience of shared identity combined with an acknowledgement of each artisan’s unique output.

By Whom?

Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) identified one personality trait that seems to be a determinant of the ability to reach flow. They define it as an autotelic personality with ‘autotelic’ described as “the tendency to experience challenging situations as rewarding” (p.820)

Luh and Luh (2012) also examine the role of passion in creative achievement. Their study of Chinese design students explores the correlation between ‘passion’ and creative achievement. They found a correlation between students who exhibit ‘harmonious’ passion with creative achievement, but a negative correlation between creative achievement and ‘obsessive’ passion. This relates to the correlation between intrinsic motivation and the flow state. The participant must be intrinsically motivated but realistic in his or her assessment of the process as it unfolds.

The various studies seem to be pointing toward flow as requiring a balance: harmonious passion but not obsessive, positive dissociation but not pathological. This seems to point towards the line that artists seem to walk between genius and madness.

Carpentier, Mageau and Vallerand (2012) also describes the balance required to achieve flow in terms of harmonious passion. Harmonious passion was found to have a positive correlation to flow, while obsession and rumination were negatively associate with flow.

How is the Flow State Achieved, Taught and Coached?

Mayer and Mussweiler (2011) conducted a study of creativity within groups. Groups that were able to achieve a state of flow produced higher quality, more creative work. The flow state was found to increase social cooperation. However, some level of distrust seems to counter-intuitively increase creative achievement. The investigators in this study postulate that more creative, divergent thinking is required when you cannot depend on a particular outcome.

Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) conducted a longitudinal study of adolescents in the US, to determine if frequency or intensity of flow experiences correlate with positive cognitive processes and affective experiences. The study used the Experience Sampling Method in which participants are given pagers and a set of questionnaires. The pagers were set to sound an alarm at random intervals and participants completed the questionnaires by describing their activity and the quality of their experience. A correlation was found between an increase in flow experiences and positive effects on mental health and achievement. They also noted a high degree of change in many of the adolescents over the course of the study, though they were as likely to decrease flow as increase it.

It does point toward the idea that while some people experience flow in very consistent ways, many naturally change over time. The ability to design interventions to increase flow seems like an achievable goal, as it already happens frequently on its own. Interestingly, the study noted that while increases in flow experiences increased self-esteem, it did not increase positive mood.

Monk (2013) proposes eight methods for teaching improvisation that can act as a springboard to the flow state: copying, adapting, contrasting, punctuating, highlighting, supporting, signposting and allowing” (The Approach section, para 1). While this list may be useful for identifying elements of flow as a descriptive practice, this author has doubts about how such a cognitive/verbal process could be used to invoke a state that is basically the opposite of the approach of the rational mind. The idea that rigid, rational thought patterns are a significant source of disruption within the flow state will be addressed in the Results section.

Moller, Meier and Wall (2010) attempted to create a state of flow in the lab. While this effort was largely unsuccessful, their analysis does point to a number of reasons why recreating the flow state in an experimental lab environment is inherently problematic. However, the development of increasingly sophisticated wireless technology could eliminate many of the barriers that currently exist.

One of the most important factors of the flow state has been that a state of internal motivation is necessary. Eisenberg and Thompson (2011) conducted a study of amateur musicians with counter-intuitive results. Amateur musicians were placed in situations that either included competition or did not. Traditionally, intrinsic motivation increases flow and the quality of the performance. One would assume that competition is the very definition of extrinsic motivation and so would decrease flow and performance quality. The study found that the presence of competition increased both intrinsic motivation and quality of performance as well as lowering their stress levels. From a flow perspective, this might correlate with the necessity for both a challenge and immediate feedback, as Csikszentmihalyi (1997) suggested.

Barriers to Flow

While tolerance for ambiguity, intrinsic motivation and other factors can contribute to the likelihood of experiencing flow, there are other factors that can be negatively associated with flow. Shyness, as a reflection of low self-confidence, and pathological levels of dissociation are just two of the factors that can act as barriers to an individual's ability to achieve flow (deManzano, Theorell, Harmat and Ullen, 2010; Hirao, Kobayashi & Yabuwaki 2012).

A 2010 (deManzano, Theorell, Harmat & Ullen) study of Japanese undergraduates examined whether shyness, cognitive judgment and ambiguity tolerance have an effect on frequency of flow state experiences. The results indicated that only ambiguity tolerance was a predictor of the quality of flow experiences, while shyness was negatively associated with the frequency of flow experiences. The authors' commentary sheds some light on the question brought up by Csikszentmihalyi's Finding Flow article (1997), which indicates that the flow state requires a careful balance of high skills and high challenge. Therefore, the personality trait of shyness or lack of self-confidence requires that the flow state can only be achieved by a reduction in the level of challenge or an increase in skill level. This correlates with the understanding that art activities and peak experiences increase self-esteem because it gives the individual multiple instances of real, measurable accomplishment of a task over which they have control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; 2002).

Another quality the authors assessed is the cognitive judgment measure; essentially a scale of optimism versus pessimism. The researchers expected to find a positive correlation between optimism and flow, but did not. The tentative explanation they offer is that optimism is

positive feelings about the future, while the flow state contains positive feelings about the present, and thus they may not be correlated (deManzano, Theorell, Harmat & Ullen, 2010).

Thompson and Jaque (2012) determined that: flow shares many features with positive or normative dissociative experiences, especially the reinforcing rewards of intensely-focused concentration; a merging of action and awareness; a loss of self-consciousness; and alterations in the experience of self, body, time, or the world. (p.479)

The study found that almost 18% of professional and pre-professional dancers evaluated were rated as having pathological levels of dissociation. Pathological dissociation [PD] was negatively correlated with reports of flow experiences, indicating that PD interferes in a dancer's access to the flow state.

The literature points to some key elements for attaining flow, but the emphasis has been on how to identify people or environments that are more likely to lead to flow. The focus has been on elements such as personality traits and demographic status that are more or less fixed. The primary aim of this study is to begin to identify elements in the environment that can be adjusted; and skills, techniques and attitudes that can be actively nurtured. Clearly identifying these factors will lead to a strategic approach to the deliberate cultivation of the flow state and its attendant benefits of increased physical and mental health, self-esteem, social cooperation and self-actualization.

Chapter III: METHOD

Humanistic psychology takes the perspective that the human experience cannot be examined in ways that are only external. That is to say that the rationalist perspective of the natural sciences cannot be depended upon to entirely explain human experience. Giorgi (1975) makes the case for psychology to proceed not as a natural science of externally-based inquiry, but rather as a human science, concerned with the complexity and richness of human experience.

Smith and Osborn (2003) defines the humanist approach where the “emphasis is upon discovery, description and meaning rather than the traditional natural science criteria of prediction, control and measurement” (p. 168). Phenomenology comes from an “insider perspective” and he says that the “exploration of the inner world of experience by phenomenology enables researchers to reclaim that part of human being that has been so long neglected due to the prevailing view that human science must be natural science.” (p. 168)

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] was chosen as the system of analysis because it focuses on individual lived experience as opposed to outside measurements (Smith & Osborn 2003). Quantitative methods have thus far been adequate to define and measure the flow state but are less useful in accounting for the varying ability of individuals to access the flow state. IPA allows for interpretation by the researcher to capture complicated, nuanced experiences, feelings, and themes without reducing them to simplistic categories (Wertz, 1985).

Materials

Materials used in this study include a list of interview questions (Appendix A) and consent forms (Appendix B) as required by the Institutional Review Board [IRB] of the University of West Georgia. The interview followed a semi-structured format.

Smith and Osborn (2003) describes the phenomenological interview process as “minimally intrusive and allowing the individual’s experience to present itself as spontaneously as possible. An invitation to talk about the experience in question may be all the structure that is required...Many practitioners of phenomenological interviewing hope that such backup questions and prompts will be unnecessary or only supplemental. One might say that the intention is to go with the flow as much as possible...The transcript of a phenomenological interview should not be read like a police interrogation” (p.183)

Because the subject matter was expected to be complex and highly personal, a semi-structured interview was chosen so that interviews could be tailored to focus on themes as they emerged within each interview. The researcher’s particular interest in cross-cultural examples of the flow experience made it doubly necessary to be able to tailor questions to the specific experiences as well as non-English and slang terms used by participants.

Included in the interview questions are two quotes from academic articles. The first, Csikszentmihalyi’s definition of the flow state, was compiled from his writings. (1989, 1991, 1997) The second is one that specifically quotes Kossak’s article on the flow state (2008). The author decided to include this excerpt to see how participants would respond to academic descriptions of their experiences. This article was chosen from among the existing literature because it contains multiple ideas that can be contested or discussed individually or as a group.

Additionally, the researcher finds one particular aspect of the article to be problematic. Kossak (2008) identifies 'stages' of the flow state. To the author, the use of the word 'stages' suggests a linear process, while in her own experience the flow state is both ambiguous and recursive. The author chose to make her own biases plain to the participants, while also urging them to base their answers only on their own experiences. To minimize the potential of bias, the decision was made to introduce the Kossak material at the end of the interview, after the participants recounted their experience in their own words.

Interviews

Interviews took place during a six week period in early 2015. Six interviews were scheduled and completed. Six other individuals agreed to participate, but the richness of the data led the researcher to stop with the six completed interviews so that they could be closely analyzed. Each participant also mentioned at least one other person they believed would fit the parameters of the study and would be willing to participate. Although it is impossible to know for sure, there appear to be no major differences between participants who agreed to participate but weren't able to schedule an interview and those who did.

The interview questions covered several areas: experience with improvisational music and dance, experience with altered states of consciousness, beliefs about the flow state and beliefs about other's ability to reach flow. The interview questions were refined slightly after the first interview. Most questions were not asked in each interview because they were discussed by the participants without prompting.

Participants

The researcher's chosen methodology favors a small sample size (Giorgi, 1975; Smith & Osborn, 2003)). Studies with larger sample sizes and quantitative methods have succeeded in

identifying the flow state and the environments in which it is likely to occur but have not been able to identify a skill set or procedure that can be reliably used by individuals to induce and control their own flow experience. The choice was made to focus on individuals with at least ten years' experience in improvisational music and dance groups. Similar artistic backgrounds were hoped to increase the likelihood of both similar experiences and similar vocabulary for described the experiences. IPA sample sizes tend to be both small and homogenous, which seemed appropriate for the goals of this study (Morrow, 2005). One area in which homogeneity was not sought was in ethnic background, due to the cross-cultural nature of the study.

Participants were between the ages of 43 and 60, with at least 10 years' experience with improvisational group music and/or dance. The qualification of at least 10 years' experience was to assure both a level of mastery and depth of experience that would hopefully result in deep, detailed descriptions of the flow state. Participants are all United States residents and fluent English speakers. One participant was born in Iran and came to the United States as an adult. The rest were born in the United States. Two participants are full-time musicians or dancers, the remaining have additional careers. All participate in some other creative endeavor in addition to music and/or dance. Two participants are male, four are female.

Participants were chosen from the researcher's personal and professional network. Three of the participants have had a personal and professional relationship with the researcher in excess of 25 years. One participant has had a similar relationship with the researcher for six years. Two participants were introduced to the researcher by other participants within 24 hours of the time the interview took place. The researcher was aware of the possible impact of selection bias, but chose for this project to closely examine a more homogenous group of participants.

All participants were offered confidentiality and anonymity, or to have their names included in the research. This was explained before each interview began and they were asked at the end of the interview whether they wished to be identified. Five of the six asked to have their names included. This information was audio recorded and maintained on file as required by the IRB, but not transcribed.

Jennifer Imashev is a resident of Pittsburgh, PA. Her heritage is Eastern European. She was raised in a large and artistic family. Two sisters were professional ballet dancers, her brother was a painter and she and two additional sisters are belly dancers with extensive knowledge of traditional dance forms of Asia and the Middle East. She is a full time dancer, dance teacher, and yoga instructor.

K lives in the Northeastern United States. She is a belly dancer, focusing primarily on the ‘tribal fusion’ style of dance. She is a professional tattoo artist.

Farzad Farhangi was born in Iran. He came to the United States as a teenager and is now an engineer living in South Carolina. He is a violinist with a background in Classical Persian Music. He is a member of the band Turku, an internationally recognized group that plays traditional and folk music of Central Asia, primarily Turkey. In addition to albums produced by Turku, he has a solo album.

Carla Monnich is a native of North Carolina. She has danced since her early 20s including belly dance and traditional Middle Eastern and Asian dance forms such as Classical Indian and Classical Persian dance. She was the researcher’s first dance teacher. She is the principal dancer and *davul* (Turkish drum) player for the band Turku. She and Ted Monnich are married.

Ted Monnich is a museum professional, specializing in the conservation of metal sculpture. He has played ice hockey since 1971 and coaches professional and semi-professional goalies around the world. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in sports psychology. He is a native of Pittsburgh and was raised in the Eastern European ethnic community where he was exposed to traditional music and dance. A visit to Istanbul was his inspiration to form the band Turku. Turku was formed in 2000 and has performed internationally including Samarkand, Uzbekistan and the Uzbekistan Embassy in Washington D.C.

Tamara Nicolai is a Los Angeles native, of Russian and Latina heritage. Her background is in Classical Music and Irish Traditional Music. She is a resident of Atlanta and a professional Blues bassist. Her first album was released in 2014.

The decision to complete the study with six interviews was determined both by the richness and detail of the data, and six interviews with very experienced improvisational musicians and dancers was enough to identify some key variations in the way the flow state was experienced. Five of the six interviews contained many of the same themes. The sixth interview introduced a key variation, that of an experienced improviser who only rarely and accidentally encounters the flow state. This key outlier was useful in illuminating the commonalities of the other five participants. Wertz (1985) concludes that it is in such variations that the 'essence of the case' can be discovered (p.176).

Procedure

Each Participant was approached in person at music and dance retreats, or performances about the possibility of conducting an interview and told why they were being approached and what the study hoped to determine. No one who was approached about the possibility of an interview declined. Each interview was scheduled and the participants were told to expect the

interview to last between 30 minutes and one hour. Interviews actually lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Five of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, Jennifer Imashev was interviewed via Skype. Four of the five face-to-face interviews were conducted at the residence of the participant. Farzad Farangi was interviewed in the lobby of the Zlatne Uste music festival in New York City.

Each interview was recorded using one audio device and a back-up device that was either audio or video. The quality of each recording was clear enough to allow for the transcription of the interview without needing to use the back-up recordings. Each interview began with a brief discussion of the purpose of the interview and the ethical guidelines laid out by the Institutional Review process. They were given the Participant Release forms included in Appendix B and verbally reminded that the interview was voluntary and could be ended at any time with no adverse consequences. They were assured of their right to anonymity and confidentiality. They were also given the option of a follow-up interview after the completion of the study to examine both the data and the analysis and to ask any additional questions they might have.

The interviews were transcribed either by the researcher or by volunteers who did not personally know the Participants. These are verbatim transcriptions. Each transcript was double checked for accuracy by the author and notes were compiled regarding body language and vocal tone. Each Participant was given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym, though only one chose to do so.

Analysis

The analysis of the interview transcriptions was conducted using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. IPA was chosen as a method for analysis because of its flexibility

and the attention paid to crucial differences as well as similarities. This method of analysis allows unexpected answers to be given more attention, rather than less.

The researcher began by reading Transcript 1 several times and making notes on various themes as they emerged. A table was constructed with the left column containing each individual meaning unit and a column for each participant. The first transcript was then analyzed, with meaning units appearing in the right column of the transcript. Each occurrence of a meaning unit was tallied in the appropriate column of the Meaning Units Chart. The analysis of the first interview was then submitted to the thesis advisor for commentary.

After suggested changes and refinements were made, the rest of the interviews were analyzed. During the course of the work, themes emerged in later interviews that had been missed in the initial analysis of earlier interviews. A copy of the chart of meaning units is included in Appendix C [redacted]. After the initial analysis, the transcripts were read through again to make sure that all themes pertaining to the research questions were accounted for. The recursive nature of the analysis and the construction of the Meaning Units Chart was intended to counteract any unconscious bias on the part of the researcher.

After the analysis, the meaning units were placed in clusters by theme. Frequency of themes in the interviews were not the only standard for inclusion. Themes were also analyzed by how well they elucidate the lived experience of the flow state and improvisational environments. The researcher then consolidated the initial table by theme.

Reliability and Validity

Special attention was paid at every stage to the issue of transparency, including an examination of the author's own ideas about the experience of the flow state before interviews began. The author attempted to maintain an awareness of possible confirmation bias, especially

in the case of the outlier's experiences. The researcher attempted to maintain an openness to alternative interpretations and to reassure each participant that there were no 'wrong answers' to the interview questions.

Each theme was grounded in specific examples from interviews, and explored in consultation with other IPA researchers and music/dance experts. Every attempt was made to determine that conclusions are internally consistent and supported by data that can be independently evaluated.

Chapter IV: RESULTS

The flow state is described by the participants and experienced by the author in ways that confirm earlier findings and descriptions of the flow state both within the sphere of improvisational music and dance and in the wider fields of work, athletics and creative activities. The flow state is an inherently positive euphoric feeling of being absolutely focused on the present moment, aware of one's surroundings and other people and working at the limits of one's skill based on existing challenges in the environment.

Themes

When Wertz (1985) speaks about the analysis of data in phenomenological studies, he advises taking a "data bath". He counsels the researcher to collect and immerse herself in rich data and "thick" description. Even though the author could have acquired many more interviews, the six interviews, once completed and transcribed, resulted in a feeling less of 'bathing' than of swimming, and occasionally, drowning.

A total of eight major themes emerged from the data: Phenomenology/Experience, Family/Cultural Issues, Creating Flow, Response to Academic Conceptions of Flow, Use of Mind-altering Substances, Disruption, Transformation, and Teaching flow. By far, the richest theme to emerge was Creating Flow which contains five sub-themes: Skill/Challenge balance, Passion/Pleasure, Environment, Performance Partners and Mental/Internal skills.

Each theme connects in some way with the others. The flow state is a complex, ambiguous and recursive process. As such, multiple themes may present themselves within each described experience. While the phenomenology of individuals' experience in the flow state

have some very personal elements that do not apply for other individuals, there are aspects such as the distortion of time, present moment focus, and intrinsic motivation that do appear across individuals. Early experiences of dance and music, as well as the familial environment and cultural world view clearly play a role in how artists first experienced the activities and the flow state. There are some common elements, but there is no 'standard' or 'perfect' family or cultural structure that leads to a fulfilling artistic life and frequent experience of the flow state. Ethnic and cultural issues were a primary area of interest for the researcher. The primary sub-themes that emerged involved identity as an artistic creation, and non-Western and non-dual ways of explaining the transformative aspects of the flow state.

Participants' reaction to academic descriptions of flow was a theme that emerged in some unexpected and inconsistent ways. The use of mind-altering substances was not directly addressed by the author during interviews but it emerged organically out of some of the participants' experience. In addition, when these substances were mentioned, they were described in very consistent ways.

The theme of disruption was one of the key areas of inquiry for the researcher. It was expected that participants would cite external sources for disruption such as insensitive performance partners and environmental challenges. Instead, the most significant source of disruption was positioned as an internal failure to respond adequately to challenges in the environment. This fits well with Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) description of an autotelic personality in which challenging situations are viewed as inherently positive and fulfilling instead of dangerous. The focus on intrinsic motivation is also connected, in that responsibility for the experience of the flow state was typically seen as resting within the individual and under their control.

The theme of Creating Flow was by far the richest revealed by the data. Sub-themes include Skill/Challenge Balance, Passion/Pleasure, Environment, Performance Partners and Mental/Internal Skills. The experiences of the participants in successful achievement and maintenance of the flow state were critical for informing the final theme: Teaching Flow.

Few individuals offered concrete systems or approaches for teaching someone else how to access the flow state. However, their descriptions of the flow state provide a rich source for exploring specific methods for helping others both experience flow for the first time and for developing the skills that lead to greater control over the flow state. The transformative power of the flow state emerged as both a deliberate goal and an accidental outcome for participants.

Experience/Phenomenology

An emerging area of research is a concept known as ‘kinesthetic cognition’.

Leitan and Chaffey (2014) explain: Embodied cognition is a research program comprising an array of methods from diverse theoretical fields (e.g. philosophy, neuroscience, psychology etc.) held together by the key assumption that the body functions as a *constituent* of the mind rather than a passive perceiver and actor *servicing* the mind. (p.3)

This conception has roots in the work of philosophers such as Heidegger (1996) and Merleau-Ponty (1964). They contend that the mind cannot exist at a remove from the physical world. The body and mind take up a position from a particular perspective and that perspective is never unbiased.

While a rational, linear way of thinking appears to be counter-productive for the flow state, there is a type of kinesthetic cognition and kinesthetic memory in which the flow state is created and maintained by a type of thinking that is taking place in the whole body.

Ted explains: *There is a degree of thought involved, because you are looking and seeing the possibilities, and based on your knowledge you are seeing the probabilities. And then you are computing that very quickly... Like a Christmas tree. Like a pyramid. So the slow talking-to-myself reality is the base. And as things get faster, the probabilities decline. So you are getting closer and closer to one point. Like a pyramid goes to a point. When you get to that very fine sharp refined moment which might be a sixth of a second there is no thought, no verbal thought. We are not thinking. But we might be recognizing.*

This is hard. We see...We recognize....We react.... Or in the same way of that sport, as a goal tender, I can see the puck coming off a player's stick as he shoots it. It might be going at 100 miles an hour, and there is no time for me to say that it is time for me to react....I simply react in that way. But somehow I compute its trajectory and speed so that I am exactly there. That's kinesthetic response. That comes from practicing since 1971.

If I were to transfer this to music, and it does transfer just fine. What note is coming next? Well let's say that Farzad is improvising, I know what maquam we are in. I know that he is not going to leave the maquam. Where does he tend to go in this progression that he is in?

And where is he going to let off for me to catch it and carry on? So before he gets to that note I will recognize where he going and then understand where I am going to go with it. So he is handing it off to me, but I don't know where he's going yet. But I know what the probabilities are and it will probably be three possibilities. And with each successive note I will sense where he is going. Having an understanding of what we do. So I know

where to catch it. And continue it in the same spirit or vein or to respond how I wish to. To what he has said with that improvisation.

Lea: So there is still an element of personal choice. Knowing where he is going to lead you, but then you get a choice where to take it from there.

Ted: Yeah, but also there is no time to say 'I wonder if I should do this.' But what comes to me is, I get a vision so-to-speak of 'Here's where to go'. Where a door opens and ok, I go through that door. And sometimes a hallway appears and I go down that hallway.

(lines 593-646)

Even though the participants made initial claims that they weren't 'thinking' during the flow state, each then described complex, rapid and sophisticated cognition. Much of the thinking was not explicitly verbal or linear and much of it seems to be happening within the body as well as the brain. The common factor is that certain types of verbal, analytical or judgmental thoughts were listed as the one thing that consistently disrupts their state of flow.

Another interesting result of the interviews is that all participants reported doing some creative or flow-producing activity other than music and dance on a regular basis. Four of the six participants readily listed one or more activities other than music and dance which produced the flow state on a regular basis. Jen mentioned activities such as meditation, running, painting, playing music and driving. Farzad reported a frequent experience of the flow state in his work as an engineer. Carla and Ted both reported flow experiences while playing ice hockey.

Only Ted Monnich, among the participants, has a working knowledge of the flow theory, yet each respondent described experiences that fit well within the existing academic literature, including descriptions of a distorted sense of the passage of time, selective focus, a sense of connection to others and differing levels and depth of flow.

Farzad, a violinist says: *My day job is an engineer. So yes, like sometimes when you are thinking about an engineering problem, a physics problem, it can consume you. That's who I am until it's solved, one way or the other. You know, I started a project, when I get in that stage I might start on it at five o'clock in the morning and next thing I know, it's 8 at night and I'm exhausted and I haven't eaten a bite and I don't know where the day went".* (lines 74-82)

This description of flow during work is well supported in the existing literature (Csikszentmihalyi 1989).

When asked if she deliberately seeks out the flow state, Jen said: *My goal is every single time I dance. Even when it's a choreographed piece, I try to do the choreography so much that I don't have to think about it. It's muscle memory and I can just completely enjoy the movement. And I don't have to think about the choreography anymore. That's my goal, every time I dance. Do I always reach that? No, but that's my goal. Like, every time I dance, I want to be there. I want to be, that's the ultimate.* (lines 209-216)

Ted, commenting on a performance at Zlatne Uste Golden Fest in New York City in early 2015 said: *The second night was a very short performance in an intimidating setting, because you are in front of so many other master musicians. They know if you are not good, but we know that we are good. And we had that comfort. And the set list was stuff that we play well. Great energy. And we could look at each other and we just go and we did it.*

And so I experienced a flow in that second performance. It wasn't in a state of improvisation, where Farzad might most likely experience it, I might think. Whereas for me it was simply playing the song. But it got to a point where I was just filled with

overwhelming happiness. And I could play anything. And I didn't have to try to get to the notes, I was already at the notes. I could hear the song in the speakers and look at my instrument and say "I'm doing that". And it sounded like a recording in the speakers. It was just so... and I was aware that everything became easier. That I didn't have to ... there was no striving." (lines 482-500)

Family and Cultural Issues

The participants' description of their early experiences all pointed to early training and enjoyment of some form of music or dance beginning before adolescence. Ted, Jenn and Farzad all began with exposure to the music and dance forms of their ethnic community. K, Carla and Tamara all began training in classical forms of music or dance. Jenn and Ted, in particular, recount a strong early support for artistic training from their parents. Ted and Carla both moved away from classical or Western forms of training because of an uninspiring teacher or community. Carla said, "With music it started in junior high, and it was my life at that point. I was just so crazy about classical music. I even told my dad... "If you don't have music, you don't have a life"" (lines 5-9).

A move to a new city, and away from an inspiring band director caused a significant disruption in her artistic life.

*And then I moved up North and that's when everything fell apart... The band director was horrible, the kids were horrible, I started getting bullied for being different because I was from down South and they were all in the cornfields there... The only band was a marching band, which for a French horn is boring as h**l... And between all that it really... There was nothing for me to do, it was all over. And my whole dream was over without anybody even f*****g noticing. So, that was my start with music.* (lines 40-47)

In each case, there was some form of interruption in adolescence and a resumption of interest in creative endeavors in early, or in one case, mid-adulthood. Farzad's training in Classical Persian music forms came to an end during the Iranian Revolution when he fled to the United States. It was only his introduction to Ted Monnich and Carla Monnich and the formation of the band Turku that revived his interest.

One of the author's primary aims of this inquiry was to begin to explore how issues of ethnicity and culture inform a person's artistic identity. Though each participant began studying music or dance in childhood, each chose a particular cultural style to study that was independent of their family's ethnic identity. Jen was exposed to and performed Eastern European dance as a child, but as an adult she was drawn to art forms that for her expressed feminine beauty and power.

After I got into belly dancing, I kind of got interested in lots of ethnic dancing. I guess we liked Rajastani dancing. I really am drawn to kind of the feminine power or energy I think, it was attractive to me... Especially when I started belly dancing, really kind of intensely wanting to learn sacred temple dancing. I thought it was so beautiful. I studied a lot of Balinese dancing and I took some Odissi classes. I just thought it was so beautiful.(lines 75-87)

Ted's experience of discovering his attraction to Turkish folk music is fairly typical for many people who have chosen to attempt mastery of an ethnic form that they are not officially connected to. After a childhood of exposure to the music and dance of his Eastern European heritage, he began exploring other forms and eventually made a trip to Istanbul.

So we're checking everything out; music, dance, everything. Wow! The music just, just...like somebody just hit me in the head with a two by four. It really got my attention.

And it just spoke to me, I mean it really resonated deep within me...the Turkish folk music from the villages, from the countryside....their version of bluegrass music...resonated with me. (lines 137-148)

He explains further: *But I thought about this. Well, why? Why Turkish music? I don't think I'm Turkish... Well let's see, the Ottomans conquered Eastern Europe, so maybe there was some spice, literally and figuratively; culturally in the music. And yes there is. So I went from Eastern European music and then I found Balkan music. It was like tuning a radio dial, it got stronger on the Balkan. And then I went to Turkey and it was like WOW.... WOW, it was even stronger. This is, like, amazing. Let's go further east, let's listen to Iranian music, to Persian musicNope! It dropped off. Back to Turkey. Oh, there it is again! The signal is strongest there. Back to the Balkans, it dropped off again. It's Turkish. Wow, wow, okay. And then there are Turkish people that I know that say, "Ted, you're more Turkish than I am. This teacher, Tawfiq Alige said, "Ted, you are more Turkish than I am." I said, "I am not trying. I'm not trying to pretend. I don't claim to be. I just love this. I feel life in this." (lines 237-260)*

This final statement is a common experience for those that have developed proficiency in a culturally-specific form that they are not descended from. Ted's experience with his first Turkish saz teacher began this way:

"He said "No". I said "Why not?" He said, "Because you are not Turkish and you can't understand this music. And I said "I'll prove to you that I can understand this music." And we drank that night and listened to recordings and by the time we were done he said "Ok, I'll teach you." (lines 164-170)

In addition to an emerging pattern of embracing an ethnic style that is not indigenous to one's family, there is also much to be learned from other cultures' interpretation of the meaning and purpose of the flow state and artistic endeavors. Farzad is Iranian, and he speaks very little about the experience of the flow state. However, he was approached on the author's behalf by trusted flow partners and agreed to talk about the flow experience.

Persians are very good at literature and poetry, and so on and so forth. And words are very powerful for Persians. Because they are so powerful, there is also a second degree of abrasiveness to words. In other words, words are powerful. There are certain things you don't talk about because words will hurt, you know what I mean?

And that's really, to me that's the sort of stuff you talk about in music. It's the stuff you can't talk about...You know Hafiz, the Persian poet, has a beautiful poem to his Beloved and he says, "What can I say, that the tenderness of your cheeks are so that I cannot even whisper?" And sometimes, you can't even whisper, you know?" [laughing] (lines 199-212)

All experiences of the flow state are perceived and given meaning within a specific context of time, place and culture. Supportive families and communities foster interest, passion and achievement. A culture or community that is not a good fit for an individual's creative impulse or identity can pose significant barriers to the achievement of both flow and mastery.

The basic elements of the flow state have been documented extensively and cross-culturally. Common elements include a distorted sense of time, intrinsic motivation, passion, intense concentration and joy. However, every culture has its own world-view that determines how these experiences are given meaning. For Farzad, music does what words cannot. For every participant, their artistic lives unfolded within a Western classical music or

dance background and/or a traditional form that is connected to their ethnic origin. However, each participant moved beyond the type of music and dance that they were first exposed to. Each sought out not just a form that was pleasing, but one that carried meaning for them. Tamara wanted to continue playing classical music but was “horrif(ied) that I would live in this monastic musician’s order, basically. Where I only lived, ate, breathed and slept music and I didn’t do anything else.” (lines 45 -48) So she continued playing music but moved from Classical music, to Celtic music and then to the Blues in order to find a satisfying work/art/personal balance. Each participant made deeply personal decisions about their chosen art form and how it integrates into their lives.

Creating flow

The ability to create flow, as well as maintain or repair it, depends upon a number of factors. Some of these factors, such as the skill/challenge balance, passion, performance partners and mental skills were expressed in much the same way across the interviews.

Regulating the skills-challenge balance is critical to the flow state and the respondents described a number of elements of the improvisational environment that affect that balance. Elements of the creative environment can be divided into the sub-themes of Skill/Challenge balance, Passion/Pleasure, Physical Environment, Performance Partners and Mental/Internal skills.

Skill/challenge balance

The skills/challenge balance emerged as a critical component of the flow state and this is reflected in the academic literature (Csikszentmihalyi 1989, 1990) Skills include more than just the technical abilities relevant to the endeavor and challenges include more than just the inherent

technical complexities of the endeavor. Variables such as the skill of others, familiarity with other participants and challenges in the environment can all affect the skills/challenge balance.

Carla, speaking of goal-tending in ice hockey comments: *But it was a very fast game and I think it has to be, you know. When it's a slow game, when the guys aren't trying and they're messing around, or they're not very good players, you cannot get in a flow state. You can't even get into the game, you know? It's effort.* (lines 207-211)

And, conversely: *I played my best when I was playing with guys who, really, they kicked my a**, you know. They're just way ahead of me. And the biggest rush was playing with the college. We would practice at one time and the college kids would come on right after us and that was not only faster than I should be able to play...should be able to play, but I f*****g did it anyway...I still am reacting so fast that I can't think about it and I still stop them.* (217-228)

Tamara, speaking of Blues jam sessions comments, "If I want to be able to play, and experiment with my groove and stretch a little bit, then I don't want the guy who plays the same three songs, the exact same way, every week" (lines 512-515)

She goes on to say: *I play with a guy named Little G, who is one of the finest performers I've ever seen and... I tell people I have the best seat in the house. I will play duo with him, and I am next to him, playing for him, being the only rhythm instrument behind him; it's just him and me. I'm not sure I ever get in the groove there because, one, I'm watching him and enjoying it and two, I sort of feel this incredible pressure as the only instrumentalist behind him... of God help me if I drop a note. So, I'm very conscious of what I'm doing, which is not that I'm not having a good time, but it's a different approach, I've gotta be dead-on.* (lines 424-439)

Managing the skills-challenge balance is a tight-rope walk between too easy and impossibly hard. Yet participants who experience the flow state deeply and often seem to stay on the high edge of challenge, pushing themselves and their flow partners. This correlates well with Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) concept of the autotelic personality, one that finds pleasure in a challenge.

Ted explains: *Not in music, but in ice hockey. I tell my athletes, "Get comfortable being uncomfortable." That what challenges your skill level is in the game. I mean, the whole team practices together so you know each other well. There's no chaos there. The chaos is the other team coming into it. It's what challenges you. So that chaos element is what is that part of the skill-challenge ratio. How do I adapt to that? Ok, ok, I'm good. I can manage it. Get comfortable being uncomfortable.*"(lines 778-786)

The skills/challenge balance is used by the participants to control their level of flow. As Ted and Tamara in particular describe, the flow state is not the only desirable state to be in. A low challenge/high skill situation can provide room for relaxation and a different sort of pleasure. At the same time, a sub-optimal physical environment or a performance partner who is very advanced may make the flow state difficult or impossible to achieve because of level of skill required, but these challenges are not perceived as being inherently unpleasant or feared. They reported that greater skills led to greater challenges and accomplishments.

Passion/Pleasure

The flow state has been widely demonstrated to be inherently pleasurable. All participants described their pleasure and passion not just in the flow state, but in the entire process of pursuing their art form. They described the flow state in terms of 'perfection', 'paradise', 'magic', or spiritual or religious 'ecstasy'.

Jen said: *When you are in the moment... it's magic, right? It's the magic versus that I'm walking through my choreography and everything's great. And then when you're in that moment and you're just so connected to everything. It's just, magic happens and it doesn't have to be an amazing dance or an amazing thing, you know what I mean? It's that beautiful...connection...where everything is just shouuuu, and you're just like right there.* (lines 367-375)

Farzad describes the process of practice this way: *Sometimes I sit there and play for hours and nothing; I'm just practicing. And then all of a sudden, you know, it's just one phrase, one simple phrase, but it describes the moment...and I play that one phrase 50 times over and it sounds so good every time. [laughing] It sounds better every time... that's just the way I feel right now, you know. That one phrase. And sometimes it happens, especially if I am not lucky, it happens at the very end of my practice session, because then that night I am not sleeping.* [laughing] (lines 157-168)

The only person who reported little joy in the artistic process is the single participant who experiences the flow state only rarely. In contrast to others' reports of pleasure, intrinsic motivation and mindfulness, K, speaking of her work as a tattoo artist, says, "I want the cool thing at the end, but I know that I have to go through the process of doing it to get the cool thing at the end" (lines 347-349). Much of her interview focused on external motivations such as frustration at not knowing exactly what her performance partners wanted, distractions in the environment and audiences that were not fully engaged. Her first attraction to her chosen dance form was a desire to "look like" dancers in the chosen form. She reports that only later did she begin to desire to dance like them as well. K's experiences are in sharp contrast to the joy expressed by the rest of the participants.

The participants' passion and pleasure in the artistic process in general and the flow state in particular are well documented in the literature. Pleasure or passion develops first for the art form. The joy and concentration lead into the flow state and the intrinsic pleasure of the flow state encourages the artist to practice, which leads toward mastery of the art form. All participants reported that they were devoted to only one or a few forms of their chosen art. All participants reported that finding their chosen form took until adolescence or adulthood. Once that particular form was identified, it led to passion and joy which increases both their skills and their willingness to challenge themselves.

Environment

Participants were keenly aware that individual components of the performance environment can come together to create situations that are fertile ground for flow. Difficulties in the physical environment, audience responsiveness, and relative levels of skill in a group all come together to form a situation that is more or less likely to lead to flow. Respondents frequently commented on the challenge of working with unfamiliar performance partners as well as partners with a higher level of skill.

One of the most consistent elements of participants' description of the performance environment was a sense of community, rather than competition. This is in contrast to Thompson and Jaque's (2012) finding that competition increased the incidence of flow. Respondents also agreed that a supportive, engaged audience improves flow and performance quality. Turku had two performances in New Jersey and New York City that the author was able to attend. K was the featured dancer at the performance in New Jersey. Of the four participants (K, Carla, Ted and Farzad), three independently described the performance as adequate in terms of skill, but disappointing in terms of potential for flow. K was able to achieve flow, but joined

the others in identifying audience response as a major element that made it difficult to reach flow. In each case, they described the audience as polite, but not engaged. People were talking instead of dancing. That lack of engagement, in addition to other elements, made the performance problematic in terms of flow. Carla, Ted and Farzad all commented on the performance in New York as well. The Zlatne Uste Golden Fest draws musicians, dancers and enthusiasts of Balkan and Romani (Gypsy) music from around the world. The audience is very educated about the music forms and the skills required to play them. Most of the audience danced. The author observed women and men dancing traditional line dances, older couples dancing the polka or waltz while small children whirled in corners and a young man in leather with a green Mohawk spun and stomped.

Farzad and Ted reported moments of deep flow and cited audience involvement and knowledge as critical for providing both support and challenge. They both credited their long artistic relationship and mastery of the songs as important elements that led to experiences of effortless joy and deep concentration. The New Jersey performance held additional challenges such as a crowded stage, one band member who had been ill, and another member who was new to the group. No one reported any technical or environmental obstacles at the New York performance.

All respondents spoke to the importance of the physical environment, including Tamara's reports of playing next to an open door in 15 degree weather attempting to keep her instrument in tune. They each claimed that though they had preferences for a certain physical environment, they could still reach flow in the face of environmental difficulties. Almost all respondents reported a preference for being outdoors. Especially common was the positive experience of playing music and dancing at night, around a fire. This environment was reported as especially

conducive to flow state. However, there are clearly cultural issues and personal preference involved.

Tamara describes one of her preferred improvisational venues this way: *It is a clapboard eighty-seat house with a front porch that is supposed to be 'no smoking', and you have to walk through a cloud and a back porch that is smoking and definitely clouded and everyone pretty much knows everybody else and it's um... It won't survive a high wind storm... It's a great spot, but I think it's as close as Atlanta can get to a real juke joint.* (lines 472-479)

While participants were aware of their performance environment and had distinct preferences, as a whole they did not find an imperfect environment to be an insurmountable barrier. Other aspects such as skills/challenge balance, performance partners and internal/mental skills were more frequently cited as truly critical for a good flow experience.

Performance Partners

Although the audience and the physical environment had an effect on the quality of a performance and the achievement of flow, it was the quality of and relationship to one's performance partners that the participants spent the most time thinking about.

Surprisingly, other than the study on drumming and social cooperation (Kokal, Engel, Kirschner & Keysers, 2011), there was a lack of literature on the subject of performance partners. It is possible that most of that work has been done in the field of athletics and in non-improvisational music or dance. Tamara and Carla both spoke about the joy in playing in an orchestra. Tamara gave examples of the feelings of power, joy and cohesion while playing in the bass section during performances of the "Emperor's March" from *Star Wars* or anything

composed by Wagner. Interestingly, both described these experiences as deeply joyful, but different from their experiences playing improvisationally.

Participants consistently reported a community-focused, cooperative mindset with a high priority placed on relationships. However, detailed discussions about the intent to reach a state of flow happened frequently to only one participant. The rest were more likely to comment after the fact, when a performance went really well. Tamara recounts telling her drummer that, “I never even had to look at you” (line 232), comparing the drummer’s support to a “magic carpet” (line 640). Other performance partners were frequently regarded as a sort of second audience that it is vitally important to both support and impress.

While the author expected to find that playing with a partner with negligible skill to be the most challenging or distracting, several participants clearly identified their most challenging scenario as one in which they were playing with a highly skilled but unfamiliar performer. Jen in particular contrasts the difference between performing improvisational dance with two different drummers. In the first case, she has multiple years’ experience playing with the drummer. She described those experiences as easy to achieve flow. The second drummer she identified as equally skilled, but because they rarely play together she found it necessary to pay closer attention because she could not predict what this less familiar drummer might do. She reported liking both musicians and enjoying the experience, but the challenge of a very skilled but unfamiliar performer elevated the level of challenge far enough that finding flow was unsuccessful, even though the performance was both highly-skilled and enjoyable.

Ted, Farzad and Tamara all reported that it takes time, sometimes several years of frequent collaboration, to feel that they really know their performance partner well enough to make flow easy to achieve.

While no participants indicated that they would refuse to play with an unfamiliar partners, well-known and skilled performance partners were preferred. Favored partnerships had some specific qualities: a sense of intuition or connection, predictability, and a mutual trust that partners will support them and fulfill defined tasks. Good partners were described as consistently challenging one another. Many share a similar world view or spiritual perspective. A sense of shared intimacy also allows participants to anticipate potential responses from others. Shared humor was mentioned by several performers as a way of fostering trust and empathy. Performance in flow was described as a recursive process with other participants.

Improvisation was described by participants as a story, stand-up comedy or a conversation.

Farzad explained: *The best way to describe it, it's kind of like you are a comedy duo team and you are doing an improv sketch. And I know that if I throw this, you're not going to let it go to waste. That's the way it works back and forth with other musicians. You throw each other phrases, you give each other openings and let them take it. It becomes really difficult when you are playing with a musician either you don't know very well or they may not have the technical experience, whatever. For whatever reason, you keep throwing them these things and they won't return the d*mn serve!* (lines 232-245)

Farzad also used the idea that an improvisation is a story, based in strong emotions. The following is part of an emotional conversation about the first of two performance that the author participated in with Turku in New Jersey in early 2015. The song in question is Havada Bulut Yok, written in Turkey during World War I. It expresses the sorrow of villagers seeing their loved ones leaving for a war from which they know they will not return.

Farzad: Maybe I'm just not analytical, and what I try to do if I want to get there, if I try to get to connect to some emotional state. Like there's a song we play, it's about soldiers going to war...

Lea: I was telling Ted how much that caught me last night. I was in such a flow state dancing to that. I love Sufi poetry and so when he explained about the images about the clouds, the longing and I kind of...that whole Sufi 'longing for the Beloved' and it just...the way he described it and the way you played. It locked me in and I was in a flow state for almost the whole song, and I just...it was...yeah, sorry. Yes, I know exactly what song you mean, yes.

Farzad: When I, when he describes...the state that I get into, what I am playing...what I am trying to play [weeping] ... I imagine never seeing my kids grow up...that's what I do.

Lea: Yeah and Ted was talking about how passionately loved that song is in Turkey and I think that's just it. It... locks into something we all, if we are sensitive at all, have experienced that loss and that separation.

Farzad: And it's such a useless loss.

Lea: Yes.

Farzad: I don't know that if trying to accomplish something, it's really admirable. But his death is not as painful as a soldier boy who is sent into battle and then dies. I know nothing. So I get into flow state almost all the time with the song and I think it's because I think about this aspect.

Lea: You know what's funny? The violin, and any bowed instrument, the violin especially, has always...I've always said that it pulls my soul out of my body. And as you

were playing... I was... putting a child in the ground. [weeping] You know, and there's this, it connects us...yeah, it's a pointless loss.

Farzad: And that's really the tragedy. There's an old Afghani poem...not that old actually...I like it because sometimes in poetry you can make points that you cannot... I'm not good at translating poems, but it basically says "On a cold snowy night two soldiers in the trenches", that's the first line. The next says, "In a beautiful palace, two leaders saluting each other while drinking wine". And the third line [weeping] "And there are two flags on two graves". (lines 354-398)

Ted describes his challenging and close partnership with Farzad in terms of his willingness to play a supporting role to Farzad.

He says of the flow state: I see my role is to support Farzad. I'm the rhythm guitarist in a rock band. He's Jimi Hendrix. I support him. If he asks me to come along on a little flight, I come. But I don't take the lead. But that has not limited my ability to experience flow state in my band. (lines 390-403)

A good partnership is vitally important in long-term projects, but frequently these partnerships evolve out of informal improvisational environments. Tamara described the sort of musician that does not help others reach the flow state.

You don't want to play with a drummer who you call a "rumba" and he gives you a wide-eyed, wild look of fear. Because he knows what a rumba is, but when he's rocking out to Rush at home, he doesn't practice it. And he says to himself, "I should practice a rumba," but he never does... the bass player who really wishes he was guitar player... the guy isn't holding a groove, he isn't holding a steady rhythm back there and he's busy and all over the place. Variants on the people you don't want to play with include the

horn player who plays too loud...the singer who thinks she's good; and I do say "she" because guys can get away with being mediocre and heartfelt..... and then the.... Insert-any-instrument who can't stop playing while someone else has a solo...

Lea: Ok, so what I'm hearing is: people who don't pay attention to the other people who are playing, people who don't...who have an inaccurate assessment of their own skill.

And..... a certain amount of people who just don't, who aren't listening...

Tamara: People who maybe have a...I think the best way to put it would be a different agenda. (lines 533-578)

In contrast, this is how Ted describes the way a good performance with Turku looks and feels: Each song tends to have an improvisation in it but the spirit moves us in the studio so we have to create that warm environment there, too. So that the creativity and inspiration and love...love.

Lea: So what goes into creating that safe space?

Ted: Exactly! Safe space. So...trusting in each other and having a comfort with what we're playing and feeling enough comfort with the song and mastery of the song that there's no striving. There's no....striving is a good word. We're not trying to get to the song, we have a mastery of the song already...

We are all happy and content. We can tell that we are all happy and content. We will laugh before we play. We will tell jokes to each other...consciously, and just because we enjoy each another's company. But we know that if we laugh before we perform we will be more relaxed. So the athletes that I work with, I tell them, "Laugh before you play".

...There's trust there, there's knowledge of the work, mastery of the work but we go into a setting where still we want to impress. We want to play at our best. And one thing I know

I have to do is play at my best because I want Farzad to be most comfortable and to be able to stretch his wings. And that comes in improvisation for him. So the longer his taqsims are, the happier I know he is. If the taqsims get cut short, there's something wrong. Not in obvious ways, the audience doesn't know, but we know. (lines 420-468)

Mental/Internal Skills

While the physical and social environment in which the music and dance occurs is important, mental and internal skills were frequently cited as the critical factor in achieving flow. These skills include selective focus, sensitivity or poetry, silencing the inner critic and an experience of reacting without thought. Participants also described the improvisation process as a kind of recursive composition.

The first element is an ability to selectively focus on specific elements in the environment and to ignore others that are distracting or irrelevant.

Jen explains: You're on stage and the spots... there's no audience. I mean there is, but you don't see them. I can tune out the audience if I need to in those situations...Through time, if something weird happens, kind of ride it out or ignore it, or just kinda...and I do. And people have told me, "Jenn, you walk around with blinders on. You're, like, walking around with, like, rose colored glasses. You don't always see what's going on around you." (lines 562-571)

She also says: I meditate too, because I feel like it's so important to be in the moment, you know...That's a major part of my meditation is just being present. It's hard because you're in this society that things are going on and you're thinking about 'what's this? What's happening tomorrow? and What happened yesterday?' and where there's

constant internet and TV. So...for me, it's having the quiet time to just practice being present is what's important. (lines 172-181)

All respondents believed that a performer must have some artistic sensitivity or poetry to work well in a group, to communicate well and to achieve flow.

Farzad said: *In music...there are several components. One is the technical component, you've got to have the technical ability at a certain reasonable level. But you've got to also be a poet, ok? It takes a combination of the two. And strangely enough I have played with musicians who were not much of musicians but they are very good poets, they understand the moment. (lines 269-278)*

Another critical element is the ability to silence the inner critic. Almost all participants described the flow state as one in which verbal cognition, judgement and fear of ridicule must be suspended.

Farzad explained: *When I'm improvising music, the one thing I have to be careful about, and that's probably the only thing I try to stay conscious of, is that I shouldn't start thinking. If I start thinking, I'll mess up. As long as I'm not thinking, it works. The moment I start thinking, overthinking it, I start feeling like, 'What am I going to do next?' That's when I usually stumble. So, the most important thing, not to get out of that, what you call flowing. Because like I said, if you start thinking too much, you mess up. (lines 88-97)*

Ted said: *I don't think, "What do I play now?" Sometimes that happens, and I just totally flub it and drop the ball. But if I think What? or Where? or When?, it is usually done. If I simply see the vision, then that's where I go, it seems to be perfect. (lines 647-651)*

The ability to stay 'in the moment' and react without rational, linear thought is described

by the participants as being particularly critical to the ability to reach and continue the flow state.

Carla explained: *There is so little difference between goal tending and dance. It's just that I'm reacting to the play instead of the music. And the play is a lot more unpredictable...And there are a lot of distractions with goal tending. Which I think makes even more, makes the flow state even more amazing because you do have to react absolutely without thought. You have not got time to think. That stuff is coming at you so fast that there is no way you can think about it... it's got to be on auto pilot. But you've got to react perfectly. There might be several different saves you can make. So it's not right or wrong answer, as long as you stop the puck, it's the right answer.* (lines 181-196)

Another element mentioned by several respondents had no established term to describe it, yet the author recognized this from her own work in improvisational dance. This element might be called a kind of 'recursive composition' in which improvisational partners used a sort of feedback loop to compose a performance note by note, or one dance movement at a time.

Carla said of her experience dancing to improvisational music: *We play off of each other. They'll inspire a move, I'll inspire a sound. Sometimes I actually feel like I'm writing music rather than dancing which is a whole other tale off in that direction.* (lines 817-822)

This recursive composition was experienced frequently with experienced improvisational partners, where each person is responding in the moment to the actions of their partner without trying to control the response of other. This recursive composition is what the author believes is being described when the participants spoke of improvised music and dance as being a conversation.

The mental and internal skills described by the participants are not clearly delineated structures, but rather a set of strategies to keep communication open with improvisational partners and to keep the logical, linear, dualistic consciousness silent for the duration of the session. Participants were able to make sophisticated observations about their experiences in the flow state, looking back from a more normative state of consciousness. However, they were all keenly aware that verbal, linear and analytical modes of thoughts cannot co-exist within the flow state as they experience it. It is possible that this particular type of cognitive necessity does not apply to all flow experiences. The flow state has been repeatedly documented during activities such as mathematics, computer programming and writing. In those cases, the verbal, linear, rationalist ways of thinking are required for the task in ways that are not shared with improvisational dance and music.

Response to Academic Conceptions of Flow

One of the few questions that was asked almost verbatim to all participants involved academic descriptions of flow. Each respondent was asked to consider Kossak's (2008) ten 'stages' of the flow state and comment on how well it matched their own experiences. The ten 'stages' are: warming up to space and sounds, seeking safety, experimentation, risk taking and vulnerability, experiences of chaotic states or misattunement, entrainment or merging, embodied shifts in consciousness, intersubjective empathy, flow, and shared intimacy where research participants reported a sense of interconnected unity with something greater than self, similar to peak or unitive states of consciousness (p. ii)

Both Jen and Ted had a very positive response to the list, indicating that the ten stages or elements reflected their own experiences. Surprisingly however, the other four were deeply

ambivalent or hostile about the role and importance of the rational/verbal in communications about flow.

Farzad reports a cultural need among people raised in the United States to continually talk about and rationalize their experiences in a way that is not comfortable for others like himself who came of age elsewhere.

Lea: Do you think that necessity, that cultural necessity to talk about it, gets in the way?

Farzad: Well, it's...I don't know that it gets in the way, but I don't think talking about it serves any purpose. You know what I'm saying? It's like me sitting here talking about barbecue: it will not eliminate your hunger. I can talk about it, but it's useless. What am I talking about, you know? [laughing] (lines 217-224)

Even though participants responded affirmatively to some or all of Kossak's stage of flow, they were uncomfortable with using the rational and the verbal to get at their flow experiences. Farzad expressed a belief that the heart and the mind evolved for two different purposes. He believes that the mind is tasked with practical matters of survival, while the heart is responsible for poetry, emotionality and relationships with other people. He said, "We have taken science, and made a religion out of it. Now we think anything that's not in the numbers isn't real. Which is not true" (lines 472-476). Farzad also commented, "Somehow your brain hasn't evolved to feel a breaking heart" (lines 470). Tamara's response to Kossak's list was, "I bet that guys plays the Blues like Pat Boone" (lines 1144).

What Farzad and the other informants seem to be pointing at is the history of rationalism and the natural sciences to negate or dismiss any phenomenon or experience that cannot be measured externally. Tamara seemed to sum up the feelings of several participants when she

commented, “So I think it’s over-analysis for what we do. It might have application somewhere else but this ain’t the place” (lines 1273-1277).

Use of Mind-Altering Substances

Although there was no interview question that addressed the use of mind-altering substances directly, the subject came up in several interviews. As requested by the participants, those portions of the transcripts have been redacted to protect confidentiality and anonymity. ‘False’ redactions have also been placed in each interview to protect participant confidentiality and quotes in the text have been stripped of identifying information.

A clear pattern emerged in the interviews, some respondents did not mention the use of these substances at all. However the respondents who did raise the issue showed a clear pattern. The only substances mentioned were alcohol, marijuana and hallucinogenic substances such as LSD or psilocybin mushrooms. Participants reported using such a substance very briefly at the beginning of their work in the flow state. They each said they used mild doses of the substance, that they never participated in ‘hard’ drug use and that they no longer use any kind of substance to access altered states of consciousness. Each respondent also said they would never advocate the use of these substances as a method for accessing flow and emphasized the danger of over-use. They spoke about the caution needed around such substances and that depending on them for access to the flow state and a creative or performance mindset was ill-advised.

Speaking of alcohol use in others, Tamara noted: *One of the things a lot of Blues musicians do and it, it ends up causing them a lot of trouble later in life, is to try to break through the state of nervousness...kinda hyped up at the beginning of a night... is they’ll have a drink...And as you get older, you might have two or three, and I’ve seen some great musicians be completely trashed at the end of a night. And no one is paying money*

to see you play drunk... it's just not happening...but I think that's how a lot of people seek that state. (lines 447-460)

Respondents' reports of a current and prolonged absence of the personal use of these substances was confirmed by the researcher's participant observation of the prior 3 years and personal knowledge in some cases going back over 20 years. While over-use of substances to achieve the flow state was not recommended by the participants, several credited substance use as a partial factor in initial flow states both for themselves and for others.

One respondent asked: *I mean, one thought and I don't even know if this is relevant, is the kind of drug-induced euphoria that happens. If that does, how much that plays a part? I think of people from different cultures, you know that... do you think there's any kind of connection to the drug induced, like, flow state or is this purely just with music or dance or something? (Redacted)*

This observation correlates with academic studies of the use of mind altering substances to induce a trance state during indigenous shamanic ceremonies (Eliade 1958, Krippner 2002). In these cases, the substances are typically used as part of an initiation, to 'open the way' and then their use is halted or significantly reduced as the shaman gains more experience.

The use of mind-altering substances was not reported by all users, but when it was, it was reported as being somewhat useful in accessing the flow state early on, but overuse is viewed as being unhelpful and possibly destructive.

Disruption

Disruption of the flow state, or the inability to reach the flow state at all, has a significant effect on participants' experiences. The author began thinking of participant K as an example of an outlier, or the inverse of the other participants' experiences. Of six respondents, only K

reported infrequent experiences of flow and a difficulty entering or maintaining the flow state. Her interview reflects a great deal of extrinsic motivation and an inability to selectively focus and ignore distractions. She is the only participant to place the responsibility for the structure and direction of a performance entirely on the other performers. Her experience is reflected well in her description of her other creative endeavor besides dance.

*With tattooing you have to deal with people, you have to deal with temperaments, you have to deal, and I'm an empath, like. So I feed off a, so if somebody is uncomfortable right off the bat, I'm now uncomfortable. So now I'm uncomfortable because they're uncomfortable, and like, now I'm uncomfortable because I'm in a f*****g awkward position, and now I am feeding off their negative energy, you know, so it's like. It's very trying...*

That's the thing with tattooing is I am definitely 50% feeding off of that other person, and it could be their desire to have the piece, it could be their energy to have the piece, like, are they excited or not, it could be any number of things. Whether they're comfortable or uncomfortable. I feed off of that energy and it affects me immensely. (lines 354-380)

K is also the only participant that the researcher observed drinking heavily during performances. K identified one of the key elements of her ability to experience flow during a particular performance is to note that she had not been drinking before that performance and she usually drinks heavily before going onstage.

However, K was not the only one to experience the disruption of the flow state. Every respondent described states of flow that were disrupted. And while most participants could recover from many types of disruption, there were some types of disruption that could end the

flow state for the duration of the session. Each participant reported some sort of ‘Achilles heel’ that could end the flow state for them.

When asked what happens when you lose the groove or you drop out of the flow state

Carla replied: I don't lose it. I either have to run out of steam or somebody's got to distract me. And they can usually only distract me momentarily.

Lea: And you're usually able to just drop back into it?

*Carla: Yeah, yeah. But if somebody gets in there and distracts me and it pisses me off, I'll do something unpredictable. And socially unacceptable. And it's spontaneous and absolutely without thought, but that's the state I'm in...my Southern Lady programming just goes the h**l out the window.*

Lea: Are people around you able to help you get back into a flow state after you've been distracted?

Carla: People around me? No, they're usually in my way. I just want space. The only people that can help me are the musicians. (lines 360-375)

Jen's critical point of disruption involves her family: *Actually it depends on the environment...I just try to find a way back in, you know? Like I just kinda ride it out, the weird situation. Like if something pulls me out and it's some crazy thing that doesn't involve me and I don't have to get involved in the weird situation I might just kick back, just ride it out, wait for the groove to pick up. I might just kick back up and you ride it back in....*

If it's something involving my family or something bad and my kids and then I have to stop. So sometimes you're doing something and your kid needs you and you just have to stop and you have to leave. And that's just...so she needs a diaper change or whatever

and that's not even emotionally traumatizing. It's... just sometimes the physical-world needs of people around...they need you and you have to stop doing what you want to do.

(lines 259-298)

Farzad is particularly sensitive to audience response: *Typically if I'm playing somewhere and the audience doesn't seem to be into it at all and just not clicking, my improvisations tend to be extremely short. Just get it over with. If I see the audience is into it and they're dancing, and so on and so forth, you get into that mood that you are talking about, where you can play for 24 hours.* [laughing] (line 61-67)

He also reports: *Mostly what I hate is mundane interruptions. If I'm sitting there and I'm feeling really good about this and I'm doing this and I'm in the flow state and my son comes and says "The garage door won't open.", it's probably done for the evening. I can't get back.* (lines 181-186)

Yet they all reported that disadvantages in the environment could be worked around or adapted to in a way that a lack of focus or mental skills could not.

Carla said: *When it comes to dance, I've already told you about a lot of distractions. Most of them just kind of become part of the dance. They're a less perfect part of the dance, because they're random elements thrown in to it. But there again, if I react perfectly to those random elements then I'm still in flow state. So unless it's a distraction that completely trips me and I fall on my face and I'm done for the night then I'm still in flow state.* (lines 678-783)

How a performer handles disruptions seems to be a combination of mental and internal skills that allow them to block out distractions, and technical skill. Increasing levels of technical skill seem to allow participants to focus their attention on how they are

processing the distractions in the environment or disruptions in their connections to performance partners.

Transformation

The flow state was described by four of the participants as a potent tool for personal growth and transformation. The flow state, and improvisational music and dance, offer some benefits that have been reported in the literature, such as increased self-confidence, improved communication skills, reduced stress and increases in social cooperation (Blackett & Payne, 2005; Coholic 2011; Kokl, Engel & Keysers, 2011; Mohammadi, Shahabi & Panah 2011). But the participants pointed toward some other aspects of the process that have the power to lead into the sort of deep and joyous transformation described by proponents of self-actualization such as Csikszentmihalyi (1997), Frankl (1968), Rogers (1965), and Maslow (1971). Ted spoke about the process of flow and the artistic process as a tool for transformation and a form of religious ecstasy.

It is what we seek. It is what we aspire to... So, what is this? This is Enlightenment. This is Nirvana. Flow state is Nirvana. This is what Buddha is leading us to. No thought. Total mindfulness. Totally in the moment. Living the experience fully. Responding perfectly in the moment. Without distraction... anxiety. It is living perfectly in the moment. Flow state is Nirvana. Flow state is Enlightenment. It is not something after death. It is living perfectly. That is flow state as an athlete, as an artist, who gets to taste just a drop of it. I'm blessed but that's what I recognize. So as Csikszentmihalyi says, for those of us who do get to sense this, to taste this we have to continue developing this. Because this is where we want the entire human race to be. (lines 666-683)

Maslow (1971) and others have spoken about peak experiences and their importance to a person's self-actualization (Rogers, 1965, Csikszentmihalyi 1997). The Iranian concept of *haal* could be very useful in explaining how that self-actualization takes place.

Farzad explains: *In Persian mystical philosophy, we have a state that is known as haal. And then you have a state known as magham. And the difference between the two, in magham you are constantly in, ok. A person who is generous, he is in the magham of generousness, he is always generous. Now, on the other hand, if you are not a generous person generally, but you come upon something that really makes you want to be generous, that makes you want to give the shirt off your back: that is your haal. That is a temporary experience of something superior. The purpose of, and I'm saying this because it's very closely related to Persian mysticism. What you are trying to do in the purpose of your life, the goal of your life is to turn your haals into maghams. To make those temporary flashes into permanent states.* (lines 106-122)

Research has shown that even brief moments of the flow state can increase our social cooperation, improve our quality of life and decrease stress (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). Participants confirmed the benefits of regular flow experiences by recounting not only spiritually transforming experiences but also the rewards of deeply intimate creative friendships and curiosity toward other people and other cultural worldviews.

Teaching flow

One of the holes in the academic research on the flow state is the question of how flow arises naturally and how it can be taught. Every participant identified their initial experience of the flow state as unexpected.

Carla's first flow experience came when she had already been studying dance for several years.

There was one night when it was just me and one drummer. Everyone else had crashed and he started drumming and I started doing what I usually do and all of a sudden it just took off with me. It took off hard. That night I was actually afraid to stop dancing because I thought this was such a great experience and in the morning it's just going to be the same thing. And I'll still just be a beginner dancer... struggling to learn when I have no teacher out here in the middle of nowhere. And I danced until I simply could not dance anymore. I have no idea how long it was. No idea. Then I finally just danced until I collapsed. But in the morning, I was a dancer. (lines 128-147)

Ted says that he believes that few people seek the flow state out deliberately.

I don't think people think about it before they experience it. I think most people experience it coincidentally, incidentally, and then they say, "What was that? What was that!" Their goal is not to achieve flow state. Their goal is mastery, relaxation, all of the things that contribute to flow state. But their goal is not the flow state. (lines 696-703)

When asked about the requirements for achieving flow, all participants said that they believed that it was a combination of some form of sensitivity or ability to connect with others or a unitive consciousness along with technical skills. Several identified what amounts to two skill sets; the technical skills of the art form, and the mental and interpersonal skills required for the maintenance and repair of the flow state.

Jen, among other participants identified the ability to get into a flow state as a specific, though not carefully defined, skill set.

It's like being creative. People...think it's just this magical thing. You're, like, touched by divinity, something just happens and it's really creative. Actually, no.

Most people that are creative work at being creative. You know, there are exercises that you do and you are constantly putting yourself in that state of mind. You're more apt to be creative when you push yourself in that direction. I think with the flow state you push yourself. I definitely set myself in a position where I want to get lost in what I'm doing. I want to get lost in the music, I want to get lost in dance. That's pleasurable to me. I definitely have skills or things that I do to get myself there. And it's something I learned how to do...But I think still there's a kind of person who might be more inclined. So I think both, some people are born...they have a natural talent or a little bit of a natural ability. It doesn't really go anywhere unless you develop it. (lines 587-614)

Speaking about sensitivity and connection, Jen said: Some people are just connected...I used to follow the Grateful Dead and there were lots of drummers and people who had no skills drumming but their energy was right. Somehow they were able to just, like, relax. I don't know. But obviously they were not skilled musicians or anything but we were able to all groove together. (lines 477-485)

Farzad commented on the difficulties that arise in any attempt to teach the flow state.

Lea: If it's possible for someone with limited technical ability but a great deal of poetry to reach that state, what about when someone has a great deal of technical skill, but they're not...

Farzad: See, that's the part that is difficult. 'Cause you can teach technical ability. I haven't found a good way of teaching poetry. (lines 298-304)

The only specific strategy the participants reported using to aid someone else in reaching the flow state was to attempt to recreate the sort of scenario where flow is most likely to happen. In each case, participants reported discovering the flow state by accident, instinctively. However, they also reported that once the flow state was achieved, it was not as difficult to achieve again. They identified skills, such as concentration and mindfulness, and attributes such as sensitivity, that it may or may not be possible to teach.

Chapter V: CONCLUSIONS

The flow state may be conceived of as just one example of non-dual or unitive consciousness. Most modern human beings inhabit a linear, rationalist consciousness for much of our experience (Washburn, 1997). Flow can be seen as an instantiation of the alternate state of non-dual or unitive consciousness. Washburn believes that spiritual development, aiming towards transcendence of the ego and the physical world, is not a linear process, but rather a spiral process. This fits in well with the author's observations of the recursive nature of the flow state. Washburn (1997) identifies experiences of non-dual consciousness as "redemptive" and "natural expressions of human development as it moves beyond the level of the mental ego (p. 174). He refers to this type of consciousness as the 'dynamic ground'.

Flow can be conceived of as a territory within this dynamic ground. There are other altered states of consciousness, part of a larger world of unitive or non-dual consciousness. The boundaries of these territories are not clearly drawn.

Music and dance are only two ways in which individuals may experience the flow state and improvisation is only one way of enacting flow.

Within the flow state, participants reported different types and intensities of the experience. This correlates with the author's experiences, although for the most part the literature treats the flow state as a single state.

Carla spoke of the euphoria of playing well within a classical orchestra, but she saw that experience as having some elements in common with flow in improvisation but being a qualitatively different state. Jen saw a difference in the flow state depending on the activity. She

reported that her flow state during physical activities such as dance, yoga or running to be different than a flow state that was entered into in a way does not engage the body as much, including such as activities as drawing, painting or meditating.

There was also a single report of an apparently negative state of flow. Carla described an experience that happened to another musician in which he felt taken over or possessed and expressed fear and revulsion. Unfortunately, Rich Paris died several years ago, so it is not possible to follow up with him. The author is unconvinced that this experience as reported qualifies as the flow state. It does not appear to have been inherently pleasurable, which is one of the key qualities of the flow state as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1989, 1991, 1997). The experience appears to have more in common with either a dissociative state or what some cultures would identify as a spirit possession. The author was unable to identify any previous work that addresses non-standard experiences of flow or how a flow state might transition into or out of another state of non-dual consciousness.

Other than this single second-hand example, the participants reported experiences that fit in well with existing descriptions of the flow state. The flow state was experienced as pleasurable, with intense concentration, intrinsic motivation and a distorted sense of the passage of time. Participants reported a great deal of intrinsic motivation, working to the limits of their skills.

Several participants described their experiences in terms that Carl Rogers and others would recognize as being self-actualizing. Rogers (1965) defines a key aspect of self-actualization as “congruence”, meaning that a person’s ideal self matches their actual behavior. Farzad’s explanation of *haal* and *magham* appears to correlate nearly exactly, with *haal* as actual

behavior and *magham* as the ideal self. Carla, Ted and Jen all described experiences that lead the author to believe that they are self-actualizing.

Participants identified flow experiences as being either individually experienced or communal. Ted and Carla specifically spoke about the difference between an individual state of flow for an ice hockey goalie or a solo dancer, and the communal state of flow experienced by the rest of an ice hockey team or a band of musicians. This, combined with the work on flow and pro-social behavior (Kokal, Engel, Kirschner & Keysers, 2011) leads the author to consider how communal states of flow work to increase group identity and cohesiveness. Many non-Western, indigenous, or traditional forms of dance are not improvised: they are done in a group with a set pattern of movements. The author suggests this is why music and dance tend to be one of the critical pieces of identity for diaspora and immigrant groups.

The participants identified three factors in the creation of flow; the performance environment, performance partners and individual skills. Participants reported that the ideal situation to cultivate the flow state is one in which the performance environment is free from any major hazards or distractions, performance partners are well-known and trusted to act in a communally supportive way and that the individual possesses a reasonable level of both technical skill and flow skill. Flow skills include the ability to tolerate or block out distractions, a tolerance for ambiguity, an emotional or artistic sensitivity, and an autotelic sense that challenges are inherently satisfying.

The higher a participant's level of both technical and flow skills, the more likely they are to resist any disruption to the flow state. Critical to this is the ability to suppress certain types of linear or verbal cognition. Harmful verbal cognitions are any that disrupt the unitive state of consciousness, joy, concentration or sense of time. Types of disruptive verbal cognitions

reported by the participants include doubts about what to do next and thoughts about whether or not someone else will approve.

Chapter VI: FURTHER STUDY

Populations Under Study

Limitations of this study include sample size and sample homogeneity. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is designed for small sample sizes and its strength lies not in its breadth, but rather in its depth. Six participants from similar artistic forms provided sufficient depth to gain an understanding of the flow state during improvisational dance and music and how it differs from other forms of flow. Participant K provided the key variation that illuminates the expert position in this sample.

However, there are other populations within the flow state in music and dance that can be examined in the future to further document the similarities and differences in the flow state and its required skills. This sample focused on expert improvisational musicians and dancers who have a level of mastery over their art form due to long practice and experimentation.

There are groups of hobbyists who have played music or danced for the same length of time as the participants but do not exhibit a level of mastery. A future study might compare these ‘permanent amateurs’ to the participants in the current study who might be described as ‘striving experts’. Questions of particular interest would be: Do the amateurs experience flow state as often as the experts? Is the flow experience the same or is it qualitatively different? Does the inherent enjoyment of the activity satisfy the amateur such that they do not strive for mastery? Are there significant differences in early experiences and environment that predict whether a person becomes an expert or stays an amateur?

It would also be useful to compare the participants in this study who focus on improvisations forms to populations that play music or dance in unison such as classical musicians, ballet dancers or communal traditional forms of music and dance. Additionally, do professional musicians experience flow in the same way as experts who are equally skilled but play only for their own pleasure?

The author was also surprised to meet or hear about a number of individuals who excel both as an athlete and as an artist. Research questions might include: How do these individuals differ from the general population and individuals who are only an athlete or only an artist? Does an individual experience flow differently based on activity? Do the flow skills attained in one activity transfer easily to another?

Cross-cultural issues are an area in which there is room for deeper study. Most studies focus on only one or two distinct cultural milieus. How might a study be constructed to get a broader view of culturally-based patterns of flow experience?

Methodology

For this study, the author chose to focus on a single method of analysis, but there are other methods that can be used to examine the same phenomenon. Additional studies will include a questionnaire with demographic information and include one or more scales used to measure flow. A more formal use of Participant Observation as well as Ethnography and Auto-Ethnography would provide additional perspectives.

The use of the Experience Sampling Method to examine frequency and depth of the flow state has been used in the past and could provide additional data. Advances in wireless technology open up the potential for body-worn cameras and measures of physiological and

neurological response. Currently available technology is too cumbersome to use during music and dance, but will hopefully be available within five to ten years.

Pilot Studies

One of the goals of this thesis was to set the stage for attempts to guide people into their first flow state and give them the skills necessary to achieve that state at will. The first formal attempt will commence in early 2016. A number of people have expressed interest in exploring the flow state through dance. The current plan is hold a 6-8 week pilot study. It will include weekly sessions of music and dance, structured in such a way as to help provide a conducive environment and teach the necessary skills.

Ideally, half the participants will be experienced dancers and half will not. Each one hour session will include communal drumming and dancing to encourage social cooperation. There will be a brief exploration of new dance skills to develop technical ability and a series of improvisational exercises that the researcher has used in the past. Storytelling and poetry will be explored, as well as methods for expressive movement.

Since silencing the inner critic and avoiding verbal methods of cognition is important, so the class will agree not to speak to one another while in the space where the session is occurring. Any necessary conversations would take place on the porch outside the studio so as to minimize distractions.

There will be an attempt to expose participants to many styles of world music and dance so that they might find a style that speaks to them. Some methods for mindfulness will also be introduced. Some form of measurement tool will be used at the beginning and at the end, along with a weekly journal, to assess and improve the process.

Research questions might include: Will development of discrete skills such as selective focus and technical ability naturally lead to flow experiences when individuals are placed in a conducive environment? Is it possible that the flow state cannot be taught, but be led in a more systematic way?

An additional experiment that will be attempted is the use of the flow state as a tool for problem solving. The researcher and other performers have noted that the flow state frequently allows solutions to arise from the subconscious. This appears to be related to the process of embodied cognition.

Carla explains: *I wish I had better words for what's been happening the last few years...*

Where I'll get dancing, then all of a sudden these solutions start floating up.

I can actually think about a problem before I start dancing, and if I can get into a flow state, then solutions to that problem start all of a sudden popping into my head. And, not like a voice, just, they just occur to me, you know, what needs to be done about the situation. (lines 266-274)

Practical Applications

The practical applications for this work are many. Researchers have established that people who reach the flow state enjoy greater mental health, a reduction in stress and an increased potential for skill mastery. The flow state is also a peak experience, leading to increased happiness and self-actualization.

Externally-directed verbal therapeutic processes can be very effective, but that effectiveness has limits. Key research questions include: How do we as academics take what we know about this incredibly powerful modality and make it practical and useful to the general

population? How can the flow state and artistic endeavors be used as part of a holistic approach to mental and physical health, and increased happiness and self-esteem?

Another area that might be examined is the effect of participation in culturally situated artistic endeavors on an individual's sense of identity and efficacy. Two populations that might be examined are those that participate in an art form that is associated with their own ethnic or cultural group of origin versus artists like the ones who participated in this study who have chosen to pursue indigenous or traditional art forms that are unrelated to their own ethnicity or culture.

Multiple Perspectives

Four of the six participants were either deeply ambivalent about, or rejected outright, academic attempts to analyze the flow state. It is clear that analysis cannot take place within the flow state, but questions remain about its usefulness to individuals when they are looking at their own flow experiences from a normal or non-unitive form of consciousness. If many artists reject academic analysis, how should it be studied?

More to the point, how does one go about reconciling the artist and the scientist within themselves? The natural sciences and traditional psychology reject states of consciousness that are unitive or non-dual, viewing them as aberrant or pathological (Washburn 1995). The third wave of psychology with its emphasis on holism and individual experience does not suggest that we reject an analytical framework entirely, rather we should approach each research question from multiple perspectives. Multiple approaches that include both quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry seem significantly more likely to lead toward a useful understanding of the flow state and strategies for utilizing it both for the individual and for the collective good.

In conclusion, study of the flow state within improvisational music and dance holds enormous potential toward health, happiness and self-actualization. As Farzad explained, we seek out these states of being as a “temporary experience of something superior”. “What you are trying to do in the purpose of your life, the goal of your life is to turn your *haals* into *maghams*. To make those temporary flashes into permanent states.” (lines 106-122)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview script:

I will be using an open, semi-structured interviewing style. Not all questions may be asked, or they may be asked in a different order.

1. Tell me a bit about your background with music and dance.
2. The flow state is defined as a positive mental state of being completely immersed in the present moment, acting with focused intention and working to the outside limits of your skills. It's really common to lose track of time, you might have heard it being referred to as 'being in the groove'. Are you familiar with the idea?
3. Have you experienced what you would consider a flow state during music or dance improvisation? Can you tell me some more about that?
4. Have you experienced a flow state during other activities?
5. Can you describe what that flow state was like for you?
6. Do you think that you perform better when you are in that state? (Examples?)
7. Is this something you have experienced often? (Do you wish it could be more often?)
8. Do you actively seek it out?
9. Do you talk with other musicians and dancers about either past experiences of flow or attempting to reach it as a group?
10. If there is a group you improvise with often, how does the flow state affect your performance and enjoyment?
11. What happens when you 'lose the groove' or drop out of the flow state? Do the people who are performing with you help you get it back?
12. Are there people you have improvised with who make it difficult to achieve and maintain a flow state?
13. What do you do then?

14. If you have lost the flow state, are there things you can do to get it back within the session, or is it lost?

15. What sorts of things do you feel like you need to have a good flow experience?
(environment, participants, time space)

16. Do you think that the ability to reach and maintain the flow state is a skill you develop, or just something you have or don't?

17. Have you ever known someone who you thought would never 'get it', but they did? How did it happen? How aware were they that they didn't get.

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The authors identify ten 'stages' of engagement that, to my mind, do not constitute stages, but rather elements. These elements include: warming up to space and sounds, seeking safety, experimentation, risk taking and vulnerability, experiences of chaotic states or misattunement, entrainment or merging, embodied shifts in consciousness, intersubjective empathy, flow, and shared intimacy where research participants reported a sense of interconnected unity with something greater than self, similar to peak or unitive states of consciousness.

Appendix B**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**
CONSENT FOR AN INDIVIDUAL TO PARTICIPATE
IN A RESEARCH STUDY

STUDY TITLE: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the production and maintenance of the flow state among experienced musicians and dancers

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lea C. Benson

UWG DEPARTMENT: Psychology

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SUPERVISING UWG FACULTY (if PI is a UWG student): Dr. Christine Simmonds-Moore

DEPARTMENT: Psychology

PHONE: 678-839-5334

EMAIL: csimmond@westga.edu

Purpose of the study:

You are being asked to be in the study because of your experience with improvised music and/or dance. The purpose of this study is to understand how the flow state is created, ordered, maintained and repaired by groups of dancers and musicians improvising together.

The flow state is defined as a positive mental state of being completely immersed in the present moment, acting with focused intention and working to the outside limits of your skills. It's really common to lose track of time, you might have heard it being referred to as 'being in the groove'.

Procedures to be followed:

You will be asked to participate in a recorded interview. The interview will take places privately and be recorded via audio or video means.

Time and duration of the study:

The time required for the interview will be between 20 minutes and 1 hour and can be ended at any time at your discretion.

Discomforts or risks

We believe there are no known risks associated with this study. There may be uncommon or previously unforeseen risks. You should report any problems to the researcher.

Benefits of the study:

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining knowledge. You may also expect to benefit by participating in this study by requesting a copy of the finished study or participating in an interview at the end of the study to be made aware of useful findings.

Compensation:

You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

How will your privacy be protected?:

Interviews will be conducted in a private setting. Each interview will be recorded using a participant number, instead of name. A key containing participant names and numbers will be maintained only in print form, in a locked file cabinet in the investigator's office. Access to the original recordings will include only the primary investigator (Lea C. Benson) and will be transcribed only by her. Transcripts of interviews and all documentation that will be entered in a computer with internet access will refer to participants exclusively by id number.

You should also know that while every effort will be made to keep research records private and information confidential, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of records. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is required, UWG will take steps allowable to protect your personal information. In some cases the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement.

When the records, data, tapes, or other documentation will be destroyed (if applicable):

Audio or video recordings of interviews will be maintained for 3 years and then destroyed.

Participation:

You are being asked to take part in this research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty. You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research.

Questions about the research study:

If you have questions about this research study or any research related problems, you may contact the researcher or faculty advisor listed above.

Questions about your rights as a research participant:

To contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Operations Compliance for answers to questions about the rights of research participants or for privacy concerns please email irb@westga.edu or contact the UWG Compliance Officer, Charla Campbell, at 678/839-4749 or charlac@westga.edu.

Participant Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I have been given a copy of this informed consent statement to take with me. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

Obtaining Consent

Printed Name of Researcher

Appendix C**[redacted]****Appendix D****[redacted]****Appendix E****[redacted]****Appendix F****[redacted]****Appendix G****[redacted]****Appendix H****[redacted]****Appendix I****[redacted]**

Appendix J

Glossary

Davul: A Turkish bass drum, originating in military bands.

Maquam: “In Arabic music, a *maqam* (plural *maqamat*) is a set of notes with traditions that define relationships between them, habitual patterns, and their melodic development. *Maqamat* are best defined and understood in the context of the rich Arabic music repertoire. The nearest equivalent in Western classical music would be a mode (e.g. Major, Minor, etc.)

The Arabic scales which *maqamat* are built from are not even-tempered, unlike the chromatic scale used in Western classical music. Instead, 5th notes are tuned based on the 3rd harmonic. The tuning of the remaining notes entirely depends on the *maqam*. The reasons for this tuning are probably historically based on string instruments like the oud. A side effect of not having even-tempered tuning is that the same note (by name) may have a slightly different pitch depending on which *maqam* it is played in.”¹

Taqsim: “The *Taqsim* is an instrumental improvisation, which could be metric or non-metric. The *taqsim* is usually performed solo, but could also be accompanied by a percussionist or an instrumentalist playing only a drone. The *taqsim* is an impromptu musical composition where the soloist extemporized a piece using the *maqam* as a vehicle while abiding by a certain set of rules particular to that *maqam*. A *taqsim* usually includes a number of modulations to other related *maqamat*.”²

¹ Source :<http://www.maqamworld.com/maqamat.html>

² Source :<http://www.maqamworld.com/maqamat.html>

Saz: “The *bağlama* (Turkish: *bağlama*, from *bağlamak*, "to tie", pronounced [ba:ɫa'ma]) is a stringed musical instrument shared by various cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean, Near East, and Central Asia regions.

It is sometimes referred to as the *saz* (from the Persian ساز, meaning a kit or set), although the term "*saz*" actually refers to a family of plucked string instruments, long-necked lutes used in Ottoman classical music, Turkish folk music, Azeri music, Kurdish music, Assyrian music, Armenian music, and in parts of Syria, Iraq and the Balkan countries. Instruments resembling today's *bağlama* have been found in archaeological excavations of Sumerian and Hittite mounds in Anatolia dating before Common Era, and in ancient Greek works.

According to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, "the terms "bağlama" and "saz" are used somewhat interchangeably in Turkey." Like the Western lute and the Middle-Eastern *oud*, it has a deep round back, but a much longer neck. It can be played with a plectrum or with a fingerpicking style known as *şelpe*.³

Pennsic: An annual gathering hosted by the Society for Creative Anachronism, an educational non-profit focused on historical recreation and experiential learning. This gathering lasts for two weeks and includes a dance and music retreat with daily instruction and the opportunity to perform in improvisational settings with others nightly.⁴

³ Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ba%C4%9Flama>

⁴ Source: SCA.org

