

Mindfulness and flow in occupational engagement: Presence in doing

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Key words

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Mots clés

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Abstract

Background. Flow is a psychological state that might be viewed as desirable, and it occurs when a person is aware of his or her actions but is not being aware of his or her awareness. Mindfulness is viewed not as the achievement of any particular state, but as intentional awareness of what is, being aware of awareness. **Purpose.** To examine theoretical perspectives and empirical research on flow and mindfulness, and offer suggestions about the relevance of these concepts to occupational engagement. **Key issues.** Both flow and mindfulness involve being present, actively engaged, and attentive. The experience and practice of flow and mindfulness are relevant to the experience of occupational engagement. **Implications.** Understanding flow and mindfulness may help occupational therapists improve the therapeutic occupational engagement process with their clients through enhancing depth and meaning of occupational experiences, as well as health and well-being.

Résumé

Description. Le flux est un état psychologique qui peut être considéré comme un état désirable, qui se produit lorsqu'une personne est consciente de ses actions mais qu'elle n'est pas consciente de son état de conscience. La pleine conscience est considérée non pas comme l'atteinte d'un état particulier, mais comme une conscience intentionnelle de sa prise de conscience. **But.** Examiner les perspectives théoriques et la recherche empirique sur le flux et la pleine conscience et déterminer la pertinence de ces concepts pour la participation occupationnelle. **Questions clés.** Pour atteindre un état de flux et la pleine conscience, une personne doit être présente, activement engagée et attentive. L'expérience et la pratique du flux et de la pleine conscience sont pertinentes pour l'expérience de la participation occupationnelle. **Conséquences.** La compréhension du flux et de la pleine conscience peut permettre aux ergothérapeutes d'améliorer le processus thérapeutique de la participation occupationnelle auprès de leurs clients en rehaussant la profondeur et le sens des expériences occupationnelles, de même que la santé et le bien-être des clients.

Occupational engagement is a fundamental concept in the discipline of occupational therapy. The recently described Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (CMOP-E) (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007) reflects the concerns that occupational therapists have regarding engagement in occupations. The interest in occupational engagement may include looking at outcomes of competence, contentment, satisfaction, and well-being in their clients when they are engaged. For example, feelings of satisfaction and pleasure may be significant factors that determine meaningful occupational engagement for persons with mental health problems (Mee & Sumsion, 2001). Occupational engagement has been linked to health and well-being (Jackson, Carlson, Mandel, Zemke, & Clark, 1998; Law, Steinwender, & Leclair, 1998; Reid, 2008; Wilcock,

1998, 2006; Yerxa, 1998). However, the mechanisms by which occupational engagement promotes health and well-being are still not fully understood. Mindfulness or flow may be ways for occupational engagement to contribute to a person's well-being (Bryce & Haworth, 2002; Carmody & Baer, 2007; Reid, 2008). Research is confirming that mindfulness improves the functioning of the brain and subjective mental well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Farb, Segal, Mayberg, Bean, McKeon, Fatima, & Anderson, 2007). Fritz and Avsec (2007) studied the experience of flow and its relationship to subjective well-being in 84 music students. They concluded that the experience of flow was stronger when students were engaged in playing their instruments rather than other music-related activities, such as listening to music or composing music. They concluded that flow was related more to the emotional aspects of subjective well-being. In the field of occupational therapy, Jacobs (1994) studied flow experiences among occupational therapy practitioners in the work place, and found that those who experienced flow were working with a client in some type of intervention, which resulted in increased well-being.

This intention of this paper is first to discuss psychological and philosophical theoretical perspectives of flow and mindfulness and suggest how they are both relevant to the construct of occupational engagement. Second, methodological and conceptual limitations in research on flow and mindfulness will be reviewed. Third, case examples will illustrate how mindfulness or flow in occupational therapy practice affect the client as a way of being present in the world while engaged.

Conceptualizations of Flow and Mindfulness

Flow

Flow denotes the holistic sensation an individual has when he or she acts with total involvement with an occupation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In flow people are usually so completely engaged in activity that they seem to forget their embodied being-in-the-world altogether. There is a sense of becoming one with the experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996). The construct of flow that was introduced by Csikszentmihalyi in the late seventies (1975, 1990) shares many qualities with concepts of peak experience and self-actualization (Maslow, 1968; Privette, 1983). Maslow argued that few reach the highest level of self-actualization; however, such a peak level experience can be experienced by anyone. Flow can also be experienced by anyone while performing different activities, beginning from everyday ones to those that are extremely complex. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the flow experience occurs in situations in which attention can be freely invested to achieve goals. The main idea of flow is Csikszentmihalyi's concept of challenge-skill balance. An activity should represent a challenge for an individual, but only the extent that he is able to realize it. Irrespective of the type of activity, it is the balance between the activity and the individual's abilities that is important. Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) put this idea into a two-dimensional model of flow (Figure 1). Flow is experienced when both the situational demand and the abilities are high.

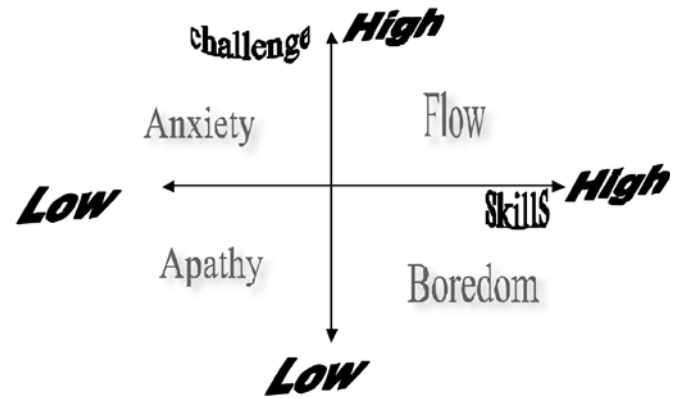


Figure 1. Two-dimensional model of flow.

Adapted, with permission, from "Flow in Sports", by S. A. Jackson and M. Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, p. 37. Originally adapted from "Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness," by M. Csikszentmihalyi and I. Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Other concepts are included in the model to explain cases of unequal situational demands and abilities. Whenever a person has much higher abilities than demanded by a situation, he or she gets bored, but when the demands are too high for his or her abilities, anxiety ensues. In the case of low situational demands and poor abilities, he or she becomes apathetic.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness has its roots in Eastern traditions and is most often associated with the formal practice of mindfulness meditation (Thera, 1996). Mindfulness is, however, more than meditation. It is "inherently a state of consciousness" that involves consciously attending to one's moment-to-moment experience (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). Meditation practice is simply a platform used to develop the state or skill of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2002).

Mindfulness has been discussed by many philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists, educators, and healers over the years (Heidegger, 1996; Husserl, 1964; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Siegel, 2007). Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as "a means of paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and in a non-judgmental way" (1994, p. 4). This definition suggests that being mindful is an active state, an intentional state, "paying attention on purpose." The essence of mindfulness is attending to intention, which embodies the sense of presence. The subjective feel of mindfulness is being aware of awareness, which embodies the sense of being present (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). This being in the now forces people to attend to intention, feel free of time, free of problems, and free of thinking (Tolle, 1999; Weick & Putnam, 2006). The intentionality in mindfulness is not purely cognitive (Heidegger, 1987/2001), but rather it is about engaging with and responding with a purpose (Dreyfus, 1991; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Other characteristics of mindfulness that have been described by researchers (Brach, 2003; Epstein, 1999; Kabat-Zinn, 2002; Kornfield, 2008; Williams, Teasdale, Siegel, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007) include being open minded, curi-

ous, compassionate, a reflective thinker, and not holding onto preconceptions. When opportunities arise, being open allows one to put oneself out in the world in a way of being drawn into being there. S. Shapiro et al. (2006) have proposed a model of mindfulness that is relevant to occupational therapy and includes the core building blocks of intention, attention, and a mindful way attitude, which are the characteristics cited in the common definition of mindfulness by Kabat-Zinn (1994). The three building blocks of mindfulness—intention, attention, and attitude—are not separate stages but are seen as interwoven aspects of a cyclic process and occur simultaneously (S. Shapiro et al.). Mindfulness is this moment-to-moment process.

Intention.

Kabat-Zinn (1990) says that it is our intentions that set the stage for what can happen. Research by D. Shapiro (1992) explored the role of intentions of meditation practitioners and found that intentions corresponded with goals that practitioners set for themselves, such as self-regulation and stress management. Another finding was that practitioners' intentions shifted and evolved over time, suggesting a dynamic quality that reflected that people change and develop deeper mindfulness characteristics, such as awareness, insight, and compassion.

Attention.

In the context of mindfulness, paying attention involves observing the moment-to-moment processes, and the internal and external experience (S. Shapiro et al., 2006). Helminksi (1992) says that whatever occupies attention, whether inwardly or outwardly, whether profound or trivial is what and where we are at that moment. S. Shapiro et al. predict that the self-regulation of attention most likely enhances the skills involved in attentional abilities as described in cognitive psychology, which include vigilance or sustained attention (Posner & Rothbart, 1992), switching, or the ability to shift, the focus (Posner, 1980), and cognitive inhibition, the ability to inhibit distracting mental events and sensations (Williams, Mathews, & MacLeod, 1996).

Attitude.

How we attend is also critical. The qualities one brings to the act of paying attention are very important (Brach, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kornfield, 2008). This is relevant to occupational therapy practice in that there may be a more conscious commitment; for example, one might ask oneself, "Can I bring kindness, curiosity, and openness to my awareness without judgment?" These heart qualities brought into practice will help one to accept experiences and not continually strive for pleasant ones to push aversive experiences away (S. Shapiro et al., 2006)

Relevance of Flow and Mindfulness to Occupational Engagement

Occupational Engagement Modes: Flow and Mindfulness Experiences

Flow and mindfulness are associated with the concept of occupational engagement in terms of how they are experienced and practiced. There is a link between the critical aspects of mindfulness and flow that capture awareness and presence during occupational engagement. Both flow and mindfulness embody a presence to or attunement during modes of occupational engagement. Occupational engagement does not represent an absolute quality, and this is why individuals report having different experiences of being engaged in an occupation.

Sutton (2008) describes a continuum of engagement in the everyday world, from being disengaged, to being in an everyday engagement mode, to being fully engaged. Sutton's work with mental health survivors suggests that presence varies depending on what is being attuned to, such as the body, the immediate physical environment, or beyond to the social environment. In everyday modes of engagement, in which most individuals engage in occupations, there exist opportunities to experience presence to the requirements of the task, the outcomes, the body, and the immediate and social environment through conscious awareness. Mindfulness is a way of being attuned and consciously aware while engaged in an occupation in every day modes of engagement.

In contrast, in absorbed, or full, engagement modes, most of the everyday requirement, such as expectations, time, space, and the like, drift into the background, and one becomes attuned to and present with a deeper sense of connection, intuitiveness, naturalness and sheer enjoyment in the engagement (Sutton, 2008). It is during the absorbed engagement mode that flow experiences are more possible. Abdel-Hafez (2006) described the experience of one of her research participants who was engaged in an outdoor running race. He was so caught up in the process of pacing himself to run well that running appeared to take hold of his embodied being and kept him focused for the entire race time. He was so absorbed in what he was doing that it was as though all the other runners were not there. Another significant aspect of this participant's experience with running was that his perception of time also disappeared. This loss of awareness of time is an element of a flow experience according to Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Philosophically, the concept of an absorbed engagement mode, or being fully engaged, provides a form of transcendence that Heidegger (1927/1962) indicates is related to "being-in-the-world" and its possibilities of being. Heidegger says that transcendence is about being wholly occupied and absorbed within it, which is what flow is.

Environmental Contexts, Occupational Engagement

Occupational engagement occurs in environmental contexts, and these can open a space for accepting and understanding the possibility of the occupational engagement experience. In the occupational science and occupational therapy literature,

there are some studies that demonstrate how the role of the social and physical environments have influenced occupational engagement and the experience of flow. Jacobs (1994) studied 90 occupational therapy practitioners in the work place in rehabilitation facilities in New England and found that most experienced flow an average of one to twelve times a day based on Csikszentmihalyi, Hektner, Hektner, and Schmidt's (2006) experience sampling method. Forty-three percent of therapists were interviewed and perceived their autonomy and self-esteem were higher during their flow experiences, and that they held such attitudes as being happy, positive, challenged, proud, and excited. Interestingly, subjects in flow also tended to describe their mood as "tense." Wright, Sadla, and Stew (2006) studied the processes of flow when one engage in art, music, and gardening. Three participants (artist, musician, horticulturist) maintained a written journal or a tape-recorded journal of their flow experiences during a two-week period. All participants were interviewed. Using a phenomenological data-analysis method based on Becker's (1992) method, each interview was analyzed separately. All three participants identified how the environment shaped what they did. An example included tidying up the work space in an art studio so that an environment with no distractions and worries could be had. Participants reported they were immersed in their activities and that perception of time was lost. They all reported having positive feelings after the activity.

In the fields of medicine and nursing, Irving, Dobkin, and Park (2009) and S. Shapiro, Schwartz, and Bonner (1998) investigated how an eight-week mindfulness training program helped reduce levels of stress and improved professional occupational effectiveness among medical and premedical students in a health care context. The core aspects of the program included developing awareness of body sensations, thoughts, and emotions.

Bruce and Davies (2005) conducted a study that explored how a hospice environment influenced caregiving. Mindfulness meditation was a practice engaged by hospice caregivers that was perceived to foster internal and external environments wherein ambiguous, uncertain, and paradoxical human experiences were supported. Findings indicated that among caregivers there was a "presence" that involved knowing patients phenomenologically and co-experiencing their worlds in the context of their health care. Mindfulness was one way that care providers could foster environments of spaciousness that supported whatever was required in a person's dying process. This study signifies the importance of conscious awareness and noting moment-to-moment experiences.

A Critical Look at Research on Flow and Mindfulness

Flow

In research work on flow, attention can be focused on the common characteristics of flow or to inter-individual differences. A major limitation in research focused on characteristics of flow is that many researchers have used different conceptualizations of flow for their investigations and measurements; thus, the

concept of flow remains inconsistent. Thus, it remains unclear whether all the characteristics of flow suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1996) need to be experienced to the same degree before it can be assumed that flow is experienced (Wright et al., 2006).

The characteristics suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) for a flow experience are (1) clear goals, (2) immediate feedback, (3) balance between skills and challenges, (4) sense of control, (5) focus and concentration, (6) effortless action, (7) loss of self-consciousness, (8) distorted sense of time, and (9) merged action and awareness. In 1990, Csikszentmihalyi introduced the term "autotelic person," which refers to individuals who are highly capable of experiencing flow. These individuals are psychologically better equipped for experiencing flow. Little research has been conducted so far to investigate the characteristics of these individuals. Logan (1988) suggests that autotelic individuals desire more challenges, and Jackson and Roberts (1992) found that they are intrinsically motivated, have high self-esteem, and are less anxious.

Another limitation in flow research is that researchers have used varied methodologies when studying flow, including the experience sampling method and the use of questionnaires. Few researchers have investigated the concept of flow using phenomenological methods to investigate the personal experience. Wright et al. (2006) conducted a phenomenological study in which he conducted interviews to explore the experiences of individuals while they engaged in activities. The phenomena that were described in his study were related to either flow or mindfulness theory, which may have implications for our understanding of how occupational engagement can influence health and for occupational therapy practice. Researchers, including Wright et al., have suggested that more research is needed to examine how flow characteristics are related to states such as mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Haybron, 2008).

Finally, researchers have approached the phenomenon of flow philosophically (Heidegger, 1927/1962), looking at being absorbed in an occupation to such an extent that one's way of being is revealed.

Mindfulness

Combining the results of studies on mindfulness is impossible because the interventions and outcomes are very different. Interventions range from the standard eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction program developed through the University of Massachusetts with Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, 2009) to other related interventions, such as relaxation, body scan, yoga, sitting meditation. The small sample sizes and heterogeneous patient populations, lack of control groups, weak outcome measures, and limited description of the randomization process compromise the data of many studies (Shapiro, Bootzin, Figueredo, Lopez, & Schwartz, 2003; Smith, Richardson, Hoffman, & Pilkington, 2005), as well as a lack of reporting of recruitment methods and loss to follow-up information (Majumdar, Grossman, Dietz-Waschkowski, Kersig, & Walach, 2002), and compliance issues (Majumdar et al.; Saxe et al., 2001). Philosophical approaches to mindfulness and mindful-

ness interventions are multimodal; therefore, it is impossible to determine which aspect of the intervention has the therapeutic effect (Smith et al.).

Although many studies suffer from methodological limitations, the findings from other randomized controlled and uncontrolled studies suggest some positive outcomes. For example, mindfulness-based interventions help to alleviate a variety of mental health and physical problems (Smith et al., 2005; Walloch, 2006), improve awareness, enhance learning (Langer, 1989, 1997), improve psychological functioning (Baer, 2003), improve medical practice (Epstein, Siegel, & Silberman, 2008), and facilitate a heightened state of presence (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000; Reid, 2009).

Despite the limitations in research and continued need to do more research, the two phenomena of flow and mindfulness have implications for how occupational engagement can influence well-being. The current knowledge about flow and mindfulness can assist occupational therapists when involving their clients in occupations for the purpose of experiencing flow or cultivating mindfulness. The following two scenarios illustrate how occupational engagement can be fully utilized by occupational therapists to achieve flow or to cultivate mindfulness for the benefit of their clients.

Scenario 1

A community occupational therapist has been asked by a group home for adolescents-at-risk to develop an activity group to provide flow opportunities for troubled youth. The youth spend little time engaged in active occupations, and spend most of their time watching TV or smoking outdoors at the group home where they live. The occupational therapist needs to decide what group activity will provide an experience that will enable youth to find the “just right challenge” and be fully engaged for a period of time. The occupational therapist decides that forming a running group could provide a goal—to run in an upcoming city wide 10k race. In addition, this activity is healthier than smoking or the passive pursuit of watching TV. After several weeks of organizing short practice run sessions, the occupational therapist notes that several of the youth have shown an interest and commitment towards realizing personal goals at running, and that running is viewed as challenging but possible. The occupational therapist gradually increases practice periods to organizing small 5k races with the youth. The 5k races allow the youth to become more attuned to their immediate world, their bodies (sensations), the physical environment (roads, hills, parks), and the social environment (other runners), and to be present as they engage in running. The occupational therapist notices that the youth begin to report that they feel freer and forget about their problems as the running appears to take hold of their embodied being and keeps them occupied for at least two hours a day. The occupational therapist concludes that many of the youth are possibly experiencing flow through their group running. This scenario illustrates that the youth were fully engaging in running and occupying their being-in-the-world in such a way that they transcended with the activity as discussed by Heidegger (1927/1962).

Scenario 2

The occupational therapist is working with Valerie, a 57-year-old woman in a mental health setting. Her goal is to enable Valerie to engage in everyday occupation and provide more possibilities for developing Valerie's state of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). After several weeks of the occupational therapist's focusing on developing a relationship with Valerie, she notices that Valerie's attunement to her world has changed from being primarily preoccupied with her emotions to being more attuned to more of her immediate environment, and she was engaging more in everyday simple activities with her family when they visited. The occupational therapist is mindfully aware of her relationship with Valerie, and senses that being available and open with Valerie provides her with a more holistic and authentic view of her client. The occupational therapist reflects an awareness of Valerie's needs, expectations, fears, the like, and listens carefully to what Valerie says when she is with her. When Valerie reports her love of art to the occupational therapist, the occupational therapist readily supports Valerie by enabling her to engage in an art activity. The occupational therapist engages in the art activity alongside Valerie and at her pace. The activity that is chosen by the occupational therapist and agreed upon by Valerie is painting silk scarves. Engaging in this activity allows Valerie to be occupationally present and mindful (Reid, 2008) as she feels the texture of the silk, senses the texture of the paint on the silk while stroking the paint across the cloth, and takes in the colors of the paint on the silk. Engaging mindfully in this activity strengthens Valerie's sense of self as she tells the occupational therapist that she has decided to wear the scarf the next day. This scenario illustrates that with the support of the occupational therapist, Valerie can experience being more mindful of increasing her active engagement in her immediate world.

Conclusion

This paper discusses theoretical viewpoints and research on the concepts of mindfulness and flow, and explores how these concepts are relevant to occupational engagement. Different perspectives drawn from philosophy and psychology are used to bestow a broader understanding of mindfulness and flow as related to occupational engagement. While research on flow and mindfulness is limited by methodological and conceptual issues, a new understanding of these concepts will lead to more research. The intent of this paper is to suggest that mindfulness and flow have implications for how occupational engagement can influence well-being as a way of being present in the world. Flow and mindfulness embody a presence to, or attunement, during modes of occupational engagement. During everyday modes of engagement, most individuals engage in occupations; there exist more opportunities to experience presence to the requirements of the task, the outcomes, the body, and the immediate and social environment through conscious awareness.

Key Messages

- Occupational therapists should consider incorporating principles of mindfulness and flow in practice.
- Occupational therapists should consider how flow and mindfulness are influenced by the mode of occupational engagement.
- Mindfulness can be cultivated in occupational therapists so that they can be more present with their clients.

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