Waiting in the wings: critical self-reflection and the disruption of flow

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Abstract

Between the two extremes of boredom and anxiety, we find space for flow: a calmer state of enjoyment in immersive, contemplative activities, which creates a loss of self-awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). This paper draws on the research findings of two qualitative research projects about skydivers and performance artists to examine the phenomenological experience of flow. In particular, we focus on transitions in and out of flow, and examine their dramaturgical management in social interaction. The question of flow disruption is a marginal theme in Csikszentmihalyi's work. This paper aims to develop this idea by exploring how and why the state of flow can be disrupted by critical self-awareness. Building on the existing research literature, we argue that flow is a harmonious yet fragile state of mind, which remains prone to restriction and disruption. Drawing on empirical data from our own research projects, we discuss the disturbances that occur when self-reflection returns during flow-generating activities.

Keywords: *dramaturgy, flow, self, skydiving, performance art*

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Introduction

This paper focuses on Csikszentmihalyi's research on 'flow' and explores the experiences that take place between the poles of boredom and anxiety. The question of how people escape boredom, while simultaneously seeking to avoid anxiety, is central to Csikszentmihalyi's research on autotelic experiences. Empirical research has documented the relevance of flow for capturing the phenomenological attractions of being completely immersed in a challenging activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1988, 1997, 2002; Hardie-Bick and Bonner, 2016), and how such experiences can lead to a more meaningful and rewarding life. This paper builds on this research literature by specifically concentrating on the experience of transitioning in and out of flow and examines how problematic transitions are dramaturgically managed in social interaction. Drawing on research findings on skydivers (Hardie-Bick, 2011; Hardie-Bick and Bonner, 2016) and performance artists (Scott, 2007, 2017), we address the disturbances that occur when critical self-reflection returns during these activities.

The Concept of Flow

Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1988, 1997, 2002) research on the phenomenology of enjoyment demonstrates

the benefits of participating in pleasurable and demanding activities that require high levels of concentration. He explains how some of the most rewarding moments in our lives are provided by engaging with immersive activities, and the overall aim of his research is to understand how people live enjoyable and rewarding lives. Csikszentmihalyi developed the concept of 'flow' out of his research with artists, chess players, athletes, surgeons, dancers, composers and rock climbers. Whilst these are all very different occupations and activities, he notes how each of these pursuits requires the individual to be fully immersed in their activity. When experiencing a flow state of mind 'nothing else seems to matter'. If the activity is intrinsically rewarding people will engage in the activity 'for the sheer sake of doing it' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 4).

To experience a sense of flow, participants need to engage in a challenging activity that allows for the progressive development of new knowledge and skills. However, it is necessary for the task at hand to be proportionate to their level of ability. The experience of flow takes place between the two poles of boredom and anxiety. If the activity is not sufficiently challenging or exciting, or does not demand focused concentration, the participant is likely to experience feelings of boredom (Jonsson & Persson, 2006). When we are aware of a situation being overfamiliar and adding nothing new there is a sense of weary resignation as we think, 'Here we go again' (Garfinkel, 1967). On the other hand, if the activity is too difficult and the participant does not have the necessary skills required to meet the challenge, they may feel an overwhelming sense of anxiety. Both anxiety and boredom disrupt the flow experience. Additionally, to experience flow, the individual needs to feel in command of themselves and the situation. They must be dramaturgically 'poised' (Goffman, 1959) and ready for action: composed, well prepared and capable of coping with social and performative demands as they arise. As Csikszentmihalyi states, 'flow is experienced when people perceive opportunities for action as being evenly matched by their capabilities'. Activities that offer a sense of flow provide 'optimal challenges in relation to the actor's skills' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 50).

One of the most rewarding aspects of the flow state of mind is the experience of momentarily losing a sense of self. The merging of both action and awareness allows individuals to 'forget personal problems' and 'lose their sense of time and of themselves' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 182). Intensely focusing on immediate tasks quietens the usual inner self-monologues that occupy our thoughts (see Leary, 2004), and so may be developed as a technique for managing stress. The result is a loss of ego or self-consciousness as people are able to temporarily forget 'the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 64). This is described by his informants as a rare and pleasurable experience and affords the chance to escape from their usual everyday plans, concerns and dilemmas. Research studies on flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Hardie-Bick & Bonner, 2016) have demonstrated how the experience of being completely immersed in an all-encompassing activity allows the concept of self to 'slip below the threshold of awareness' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 64). A devoted rock climber captures this process:

> *You feel more alive; internal and external don't get confused. The task at hand is so rich in its complexity and pull [that] your intensity as a conscious subject is diminished; a more subtle loss of self than mere forgetfulness.* (cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 86)

Usual levels of self-consciousness return *after* the activity. Individuals are then in a position to self-consciously reflect on their performance. For example, it is only when a climber has reached a belay stance or the peak of a difficult summit that she is able to reflect on her personal achievement. This level of critical self-awareness was not present during the activity. Csikszentmihalyi explains that it is only after the activity that the self becomes aware of itself and is able to adopt an outside perspective in order to judge their achievements and disappointments.

Flow Disruption: The Return of Reflexive Selfhood

This poses some interesting questions in relation to Mead's (1934) theory of the dualistic social self. Mead developed James's (1890) distinction between subjective and objective parts of the self: the 'I' as the agent of thought and action, and the 'Me', the version(s) of oneself that were presented to others. Mead re-imagined this as a dynamic, dialogic process of 'internal conversation' between two temporal phases. For Mead, the 'I' was the creative, impulsive agent of social action, while the 'Me' was an image of oneself, viewed from the perspective of others. The social self was highly reflexive, and this involved a dynamic, cyclical process of looping between the two phases: a perpetual sequence of acting (subject), reflecting (object) and reacting (subject) to oneself. However, this cycle can occasionally be broken. Flow is one example of this. In the flow state of mind, as Csikszentmihalyi describes it, the 'Me' temporarily disappears and the 'I' takes over. During flow, the self is reacting spontaneously and automatically, but the reflexive self is absent. Engaging in demanding activities that require deep levels of focused concentration overrides self-awareness. The self is not aware of itself.

Nevertheless, this temporary suspension of the reflexive 'Me' phase is fragile and precarious. It, too, can easily be disrupted, bringing the 'Me' voice back in to the internal dialogue. Csikszentmihalyi shows some recognition of this as a hypothetical scenario, commenting on the potential re-emergence of self-consciousness during a flow experience: 'At the time, she doesn't have the opportunity to reflect on what this means in terms of the self – if she did allow herself to become self-conscious, the experience could not have been very deep' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 65–66). Here Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges how it is possible to slip out of the flow state of mind. While completely absorbed in the flow state the individual does not reflect on the meaning of their performance, but if the experience is *not very deep*, self-awareness can temporarily return. As one of Csikszentmihalyi's climbers stated:

> *When things are going poorly, you start thinking about yourself. When things go well, you do things automatically without thinking. You pick up the right holds, equipment, and it is right.* (cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 86)

However, the question of flow disruption remains a marginal theme in Csikszentmihalyi's work, and his co-authored research in sports psychology (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) also remains largely focused on achieving and maintaining flow. We seek to develop this research further by exploring how and why flow can be disrupted by elevated self-awareness. If a participant is not deeply enough immersed in the activity to experience flow, then what has prevented this? We also examine how actors experience these transitions in and out of flow, and how they pragmatically manage them, considering the dramaturgical techniques that they use. Using examples from empirical research on skydiving and stage fright, we address the disturbances that occur when self-consciousness and reflexivity return at three key moments, and demonstrate how even the most exciting forms of action must also be carefully managed.

Two Studies

In the following discussion, we reflect upon the findings of two qualitative research projects that we conducted independently, systematically comparing them at three temporal moments. In each of these, we focus on how participants of skydiving and performance art experienced and attempted to manage the disruption of the 'flow' state of mind. This analytical technique has been suggested by previous researchers (Alvesson & Skolberg, 2000; Finlay, 2002), as a way of enhancing researchers' mutual understandings of the reflexive self in fieldwork settings (Sharma et al.,, 2009). Both qualitative projects aimed to capture the subjective lived experiences of participants before, during and after the activities. Our analysis of this temporal arc therefore aims to build upon previous research findings on flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, Mitchell, 1983) by shifting attention to the phenomenological aspects of its disruption.

Hardie-Bick's (2011) research project on skydiving investigated the routine activities and social experiences of becoming a skydiver. The findings of this research are based on 15 months of participant and non-participant observation at a parachute centre (drop zone) in the United Kingdom. This strategy was important for gaining trust and building rapport with neophytes and experienced skydivers. In addition to this active membership role (Adler and Adler, 1987), in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 participants. All interviewees were recruited whilst carrying out the fieldwork. The research involved interviewing and observing a number of experienced skydivers who were dedicated and committed to the world of skydiving, alongside an

investigation of the attitudes and experiences of novice parachute students. The overall aim was to reveal how individual conceptions of skydiving gradually change as novice parachute students become immersed within the skydiving community.

Scott's research project was designed to investigate 'the paradox of shy performativity': the puzzling question of how some people can feel acutely shy in everyday life, yet be confident about performing on stage (Scott, 2007, 2017). Scott conducted semi-structured interviews with ten performing artists. These included two theatre actors (male), one television actor (male), one singer and ballet dancer (female), one drag king (transgender), two musicians (both male singer-songwriters and band frontmen), two stand-up comedians (one female, one male) and one spoken word poet and teacher (female). The participants were volunteers, recruited via local advertisements, professional agents and personal contacts. Eight interviews were conducted face-to-face and two by email, for reasons of practicality. In both types of interview, the questions explored participants' experiences of everyday shyness, decisions to enter the performing arts, experiences of stage fright, and the degree of similarity between their onstage characters and offstage, 'real' selves.

Research Findings: Disruptions and Transitions of Flow

In the following sections, we discuss data from our two studies that illustrate the experience of flow disruption. We have divided these into three temporal moments: before, during and after the activity. In each of these stages, we examine what is happening to the social self in terms of changes in reflexivity, and how actors manage these transitions in and out of flow. In the first section, we look at how self-consciousness can prevent people from entering the state of flow, as they are too anxious to concentrate on the role they should be playing. As our data suggest, the heightened self-awareness generated by the pursuit of excitingly intense activities can be counter-productive. Next, we examine disturbances of flow that occur mid-performance, when something unexpected happens that jolts the actor out of flow and makes them feel suddenly self-conscious. Finally, we consider participants' accounts as they retrospectively reflect on their activities, in terms of the extent to which they feel they were able to 'be themselves' and play their roles authentically.

Anticipatory Inhibition

1. *First parachute jump*

> *The fear kicked in when I was walking to the plane. I started having bad thoughts. I was thinking, 'shit' (laughs) and my heart started pounding and I was trying to remember the [emergency] drill and I wasn't very good at it but I just carried on walking. And in the plane I panicked a bit because I still couldn't remember the drill. But then, as we were going further up and up, I started thinking, 'OK I'm going to have to do it' (laughs). And then the fear started kicking in a bit more. A lot more. I think I needed the loo, and my thoughts were all over the place even though I was trying to concentrate.*
> (Emily, reflecting on her first parachute jump)

All respondents experienced high levels of fear on their first jump. Tim, also a novice parachutist, commented on how the fear of jumping was something everyone experienced.

Some interviewees commented on how the instructors at the drop zone used humour in the plane to try to reassure students. Tim explained how his instructor 'stuck his head out of the plane' and made amusing faces against the wind. A similar tactic was used during Hardie-Bick's first jump when the instructor waved his arms around nodding and dancing to the music being played in the plane. Although humour may be employed by the instructors in an attempt to relieve students of some of their pre-jump anxiety, both examples only provided temporary relief.

Interviewees reminisced about how they experienced high levels of fear on their first jump. This is not surprising. During the parachute training course students were continuously made aware of all the possible contingencies that can and do occur. For example, the parachute lines may be tangled, the static line could become stuck (this is referred to as a 'static line hang-up' and results in the parachutist hanging by the static line underneath the plane), the parachutist's legs or arms may become caught in the lines, the parachute may not open properly, or it may be damaged. Before the first jump students learn how to recognise and manage a range of dangerous situations. There is a great deal of information for the novice to remember, and the scenarios discussed during the ground training can occupy the mind and distract parachutists from concentrating on the task at hand. This is not the automatic and effortless state of consciousness that enhances flow. The individual is often too anxious to lose their self-awareness; the challenge is too overwhelming. As one of the instructors said, after the first jump parachute students are just happy to still be alive.

2. *Stage fright*

For the performing artists, the experience of stage fright encompassed similar concerns about not being able to 'get into character' and give a controlled, convincing and dramaturgically competent performance. Actors are concerned with making an embarrassing blunder in the technical execution of their moves (e.g. fluffing lines or dropping equipment) and thus being exposed as incompetent before a critically scrutinising audience. They imagine how these others would view their performance and anticipate their making evaluating judgements, which would discredit their identity claims to be 'normal', poised and competent members of the theatrical team (Goffman, 1959, 1971).

In this process of reflective self-objectification from an external perspective, we see the stubborn and resilient presence of the Meadian 'Me', who refuses to slip below the threshold of consciousness. These participants were unable to get into character – to enter the state of flow – because they were so aware of themselves as actors: the real self behind the mask. This division between the two parts of the self meant that the 'I' and 'Me' could not harmoniously blend together and enable unreflexive role immersion: a 'sincere' belief in the part that one is playing (Goffman, 1959). Instead of getting lost in the performance and 'finding the role within oneself' as an authentic expression of identity, they remained stuck in an awkward and uncomfortable position of critical self-distance, 'finding oneself inside the role' (Hayman, 1969).

> *The silence in itself is really scary, cos you realise they're listening to you. And that's terrifying. So you just have to block them out and pretend they're not there.* (Cory, drag king)

Stage fright is defined as a feeling of intense nervousness before a live performance (Lyman and Scott, 1970). This ostensibly focuses on the pragmatic consequences of technical mistakes, but ultimately reflects deeper questions of ontological security and existential self-doubt. Because performance art demands such a deep level of personal and emotional commitment, often being perceived as a vocation, the actor invests a great deal of themselves into their work. This renders them vulnerable to rejection, an ontological risk of which they are all too painfully aware. It is not simply their work that might be criticised, but rather their real, core self might be exposed. One participant was particularly attuned to this as she compared two different forms of performance art:

> *... your voice is such an intrinsic part of YOU, so if people won't like it, that would feel like a massive rejection of YOU. Ballet's really controlled; it's not really you in it, and musicals are really tacky and over the top, so it's not really expressing what's inside of you. Yeah, singing's much more baring your soul than dancing is.* (Josie, singer and dancer)

Not surprisingly, then, it takes a great leap of faith to accept this ontological danger and put oneself under the spotlight. The stakes are high, and the consequences of getting it 'wrong' are reflexively anticipated, to the very core of one's being. In the experience of stage fright, this mountain can feel insurmountable, and so it is impossible to enter flow.

Disruptions and Interruptions

1. *Losing your nerve*

All the novice parachutists interviewed were unaware of any statistics relating to the amount of deaths there were in the UK from skydiving. Unlike experienced skydivers who regularly checked skydiving web sites and specific magazines, and would want to know exactly why a fatality occurred, novice parachutists claimed to have 'no idea'. Nevertheless, Andrew did know exactly how many fatalities there were. Even at an early stage of his skydiving career Andrew spent a considerable amount of time finding out about fatalities and serious injuries around the world. Andrew's curiosity was aroused when he directly witnessed how skydiving could have devastating consequences:

> *While I was still doing my course one of my instructors did a low turn and got killed. It nearly put me off. I mean I was having a hard time anyway. I was having problems doing turns in free fall and I was pretty much ready to jack it all in*

because I just couldn't get it right and then that happened. I was so close to just jacking it in completely. I didn't jump for about a month after that.

The experience of flow is a fragile state of mind and can be easily disrupted. To continue his skydiving career Andrew studied the available evidence and was able to make a rational decision to continue. Since his instructor's death, Andrew tried to gain as much knowledge about the sport as possible. Not only would Andrew know about the amount of fatalities but he would also try to learn from previous mistakes. He explained that although people assumed skydiving to be dangerous, he believed the act of jumping out of a plane to be a calculated risk: 'The amount of research that has gone into producing the equipment has significantly reduced the risks. Anyone who knows the statistics knows that it's really unlikely that you're going to end up dead.' The death of his instructor disrupted the flow state of mind and triggered the pre-jump anxiety he had previously experienced. Andrew lost his nerve, but he also persevered. By carrying out research into skydiving fatalities and by ensuring he had the most up-to-date information concerning the latest safety techniques and equipment, Andrew was able to manage his fear and successfully continued his training.

2. *Breaking character*

In the theatrical realm, flow can be accomplished but then lost, through 'inopportune intrusions' (Goffman, 1959) that disrupt the smooth unfolding of the show. The paradox of shy performativity works by facilitating a state of transcendent consciousness, whereby the internal critic of the Shy 'Me' recedes and the 'I' takes over, so that the actor becomes lost in their character. The actor brackets out their awareness of the contrived setting of the theatre and of the show as a social encounter between actor and audience (cf. Goffman, 1959; Blumer, 1969). However, occasionally during a performance, something happens that breaks through this perceptual 'fourth wall' and permeates the bubble of non-reflective consciousness, bringing the actor back into awareness of precisely these contrived aspects of the scene as a social situation. They are jolted out of the make-believe world and back into the realm of the quotidian, with its mundane agonies of self-doubt. Lyman and Scott (1970) describe this as an experience of 'frame disruption', drawing on Goffman's (1974) idea that all social scenes are surrounded by interpretive frames, through which those present understand what is going on and adapt their lines of action. When frames are disrupted or disputed, it becomes harder for team-mates to co-ordinate their roles and present a coherent team performance.

One example of this came from Noah, who recalled an occasion when he suddenly became aware of the physical, embodied presence of an audience member. This immediately led him to imagine the audience perspective in general, and reflect upon his objectified self under their gaze:

> *It was such a tiny studio, and I looked at a woman dead in the eye, at one time, and I thought, 'Fuck! What have I just…?' And – because you're trying to look into the middle distance, but if the audience is the middle distance, sometimes it's impossible… you have to stare at their chests or stare at their legs or their feet…. When I looked at this woman, I think I instantly looked up, or did something, and that broke me.* (Noah, theatre actor)

This account of 'breaking character' indicates a splitting of the social self. Not only do we find a separation between actor and persona, which is common to everyday situations of role distance (Goffman, 1961) and cynical communication out of character (Goffman, 1959), but we also find a deeper and more profound division between the 'I' and 'Me' phases of mindful, self-reflective conduct. The actor experiences a dislocating shift in consciousness that forces them to take an external perspective towards themselves. To the extent that this transports them back into the 'real', usual world, they resume their preoccupation with the social consequences of a flawed performance.

Recovering and Recapturing Flow

1. *Investment in identity*

Skydiving is an activity that provides the opportunity to construct, enact and negotiate a new identity (Celsi et al., 1993). Indeed, the desire to achieve a new identity makes an important contribution to the determination of students to become a licensed skydiver. Karl provides a good example of a committed student who successfully managed to adopt and construct an identity around his preoccupation. Karl's new social identity had begun to affect and shape his motivations and responses (see Hewitt, 1991). Not only was his identity recognised by those outside the skydiving community, but other skydivers also started to positively reinforce and validate his claims. Karl's enthusiasm and commitment ensured that he was accepted by the regular skydivers. In his own words, Karl enjoyed 'talking with everyone' and modelled his behaviour and generally conformed to what he assumed to be expected of him (Williams, 2000). Nevertheless, after making three successful parachute jumps, he surprised everyone when he shouted to his instructor 'I'm not getting out':

> *It was the first time I'd seen other people getting out of the plane and that scared me…There was three of us [students] and the first two got out [of the plane] and I was behind the pilot's seat and the jump master said, 'right', and I said, 'I can't do this', and he said, 'oh we'll go round again', and I said, 'you can go round as many times as you like, I'm not getting out'. So they radioed down and said that I wasn't getting out and I got some stick. My first reaction was, 'I'm going to get in my car and I'm going home'. I didn't want to stay around. I felt ashamed and embarrassed.*

Karl admitted to feeling 'ashamed and embarrassed' at not being able to jump. Like Andrew, Karl's self-awareness returned, he lost the flow state of mind and became very aware and highly anxious about the prospect of jumping out of a plane. Karl lost face as he failed to perform in front of a witnessing audience (Holyfield and Jonas, 2003). As Gross and Stone (1964, pp. 14–15) suggest, embarrassment is caused when 'a person is exposed as having no right to play the role he has laid claim to, because the identity in which his role is anchored is invalid'. Embarrassment occurred as his identity claims unexpectedly came under attack (Lyman & Scott, 1989). He experienced 'shame before the Other' (Sartre, 1998) as he reflected upon how his 'Me' was being evaluated by an audience of 'competent others' (Scott, 2007; cf. Mead, 1934). Not being able to live up to his reputation meant that he had seriously jeopardised his new identity. Karl's refusal to jump certainly was unexpected, but after he had taken the ritualistic 'stick', the 'instructors and everyone else' encouraged Karl to continue. Karl's humbling experience was turned into one of the 'lesson stories' (Jonas, 1999) used by skydivers (including Karl) to encourage other students in similar situations to 'stick with it'.

2. *Liberation of the 'true' self*

As Hardie-Bick (2015) argues, self-consciousness often returns *after* an activity, as the 'I' slips away and the 'Me' returns to evaluate its own show. Coming off stage after a performance is an important, enabling ritual in this regard, its physically embodied execution helping actors make the symbolic transition back from the theatrical to the social world. In the immediate aftermath of a show, actors may experience the 'high' feeling that Lyng (1990) identifies in edgework, as a heightened, purified sense of self. Alternatively, they may critically reflect on any mistakes they made, and chastise their actor-selves for their incompetence. In both cases, there is a split between the two phases of the social self, and the adoption of an external, social audience perspective on the objectified 'Me'.

Many of the performing artists reflected on the differences between their on- and offstage selves, and cited this as a key motivation for their vocation. This raises interesting questions about longer-term identity as a matter of personal integrity and authenticity. Whereas people who are confident both on and offstage might see themselves as relatively stable and consistent, for those who strongly self-defined as shy in everyday life, performing on stage represented an important contrast. Onstage, their personae were totally different from their usual demeanour, but importantly, felt more true to their 'real' selves. This paradox that contrived artificiality can feel more authentic than 'paramount reality' (Cohen & Taylor, 1995) lies at the heart of shy performativity. As Lara explained, it was this mechanism of self-division that allowed her rare and precious opportunities to be herself:

> *Part of my shyness comes from the idea that some of the things I say or think might be inappropriate for day-to-day conversations, and I will say the wrong thing and accidentally upset someone. In my daily life I feel I have to be polite to the status quo. On stage I can spell out everything that annoys me about the status quo, and as long as it's funny, I can say anything … The jokes are the real me, not what a character would say … I am myself on stage. More myself than [in] other areas of my life. … I often wish I could be that verbose and forthright in my real life.* (Lara, stand-up comedian)

Lara's account indicates that flow occurred when

James Hardie-Bick and Susie Scott

she was on stage, and that this was central to her sense of integrity and authenticity. Importantly, however, she needed the contrasting periods of time outside of the performance when she was *not* in flow in order to notice and appreciate the difference. Transitions in and out of flow, then, may help us to sharpen our perception of this nebulous experience.

Analysis and Discussion

Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow has provided many valuable insights into why this state of mind is appealing and why we seek to sustain it. However, little has been said about the processes and potential difficulties of entering the state of flow, or maintaining it in the face of challenging circumstances. This is particularly relevant when the perceived dangers are physical, ontological or both. This paper has explored the phenomenological experience of flow being disrupted or hindered in two example cases of skydiving and performance art. In addition, we have also examined the dramaturgical strategies through which actors manage these experiences.

Based on our empirical project data, we have suggested that transitions in and out of flow occur at three critical moments. Beforehand, flow can be prevented or inhibited through performance anxiety; during the activity, disruption or interruption can occur due to a self-conscious awareness of the external situation; and afterwards, actors exiting the role may reflectively evaluate their performance and feel more or less detached from the parts they had been playing. Where the actor feels that their performance has undermined their identity claims, they may employ dramaturgical strategies to restore and re-integrate their sense of personal integrity and authenticity.

This raises Interesting questions about the degree of integration or fragmentation within the Meadian social self. The clinical implications of this process have been discussed in the context of integrative, existential and humanistic psychotherapies (Rogers, 1961; Yalom, 1980; Schneider & Krug, 2010). Flow appeals because it promises to harmoniously blend the two internal dialogic phases, 'I' and 'Me', fusing the subjective and objective parts of the social mind. This provides an escape from the 'normal self-consciousness' that plagues everyday life, as the unreflexive 'I' takes over and the critical voice of the 'Me' disappears below the threshold of self-awareness. However, when flow is prevented or disrupted, this splitting of the self occurs again: the 'Me' returns, bringing the actor back into a state of self-conscious detachment from their role or character. Reflecting on themselves as objects, they may critically evaluate their success and credibility from the perspective of the imagined audience, or find their attention drawn to the dramatic intensity of the scene. The return of normal self-consciousness interrupts the harmony of I' and 'Me', re-introducing anxiety and ontological uncertainty. There is a certain irony in the circularity of this process, as action pursued in order to escape self-conscious reflexivity creates the very conditions for its own disruption. However, the reflexive capacity of the human actor also provides them with the tools needed to repair this damage, in the form of dramaturgical awareness and circumspection (Goffman, 1959). By observing, working on and managing their identities, participants demonstrate a significant quality of dramatic agency.

Although our studies were conducted independently, and document very different settings, we found that participants reported similar experiences of flow disruption. Comparing and discussing our projects was therefore valuable for drawing our attention to the phenomenological features that are common across these two specific settings and therefore might be generalsable to a wider range of contexts.

Conclusion

Research on flow has demonstrated the appeal of activities that have the potential to escape 'normal self-consciousness' and critical self-awareness (Leary, 2004). The Meadian social self is characterised by a dialogical process of self-reflection, but flow presents an occasional opportunity to break this cycle. During flow, the 'Me' part of the mind disappears below the threshold of awareness while the unreflexive 'I' takes over. Despite the appeal of flow as an all-encompassing state of mind, however, we have argued that it is fragile and precarious, being easily prevented or disrupted. Skydiving and performance art are both activities that demand high levels of concentration, technical skill and precision, and appeal to different levels of knowledge, experience and expertise.

Whilst these are requirements for all activities that generate a sense of flow, failure to maintain high levels of competence when performing physically or ontologically risky activities can have catastrophic consequences. Self-consciousness can return to disrupt flow, afflicting both experienced and novice performers. Our data have revealed three critical moments when actors transition in and out of flow. These occur in the anticipatory stage before the activity, during its enactment, and after the event when actors reflectively evaluate their performance. In this last stage, actors demonstrate agency as they engage in dramaturgical identity work to repair and restore their credibility.

This builds upon the existing literature on flow, suggesting new directions for research. Csikszentmihalyi has argued that retrospective self-awareness is an empowering experience, encouraging positive self-conceptions by building greater confidence and a stronger, more coherently integrated sense of self. While we acknowledge that this is the case when performances are successfully accomplished, we have emphasised some of the dilemmas that arise when they are compromised. We have also highlighted the agentic strategies actors use to manage these situations and the implications for their social identities. Extending Csikszentmihalyi's optimistic interpretation of reflexivity, our research findings suggest that such self-awareness also has the ability to disrupt or inhibit flow. Rather than reinforcing positive self-conceptions, reflexivity can undermine self-confidence and destabilise ontological security. Nevertheless, we have also shown how it is precisely this state of critical self-awareness that gives actors the necessary dramaturgical skills and resources to manage the resulting interactional contingencies and perform reparative identity work. S

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