

## **Advanced Methods in Organizational Psychology Literature Review**

One of the most ambitious theories in the field of positive psychology is arguable Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. Flow theory postulates that an individual's life can be improved by enhancing the quality of his/her experience, and that the quality of a person's subjective experience can be maximized by balancing his/her perceived skills and perceived difficulty of the challenge at hand such that perceived challenges and perceived skills are both high (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). When these conditions are fulfilled, an individual may enter a state of flow, which is characterized as a psychological state where a person experiences profound task-absorption, cognitive efficiency, and intrinsic enjoyment. (Moneta, 2004). It is proposed that when someone perceives low challenges and low skills, he/she experiences apathy and the quality of experience is low; when someone perceives high challenges and low perceived skill, he/she experiences anxiety; when someone perceives low challenge and high perceived skill, he/she experiences boredom.

The state of flow is believed to be one where optimal experiences can be reaped, and its occurrence is strongly correlated to trait happiness (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter, 2003). In a comprehensive review of investigations into flow theory, Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) believe that flow gives rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of mastery and a heightened sense of self-esteem. Most importantly, they also found that high quality of experience is related to higher job/personal personal satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Furthermore, flow theory posits that individuals with “autotelic” personalities tend to experience flow more frequently and more intensely (Moneta, 2004). Autotelic people are said to be driven by the “teleonomy of the self” which is a dynamic, twofold self-motivation process such that: (1) when perceived skills are less than perceived challenge, the individual experiences anxiety and tries to balance by learning new skills; (2) when perceived skills are greater than perceived challenges, the individual experiences boredom and tries to balance by seeking more challenging activities (Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Therefore, as an individual gains mastery over a certain challenge, its perceived difficulty drops and he/she will have to seek out new challenges in order to continue experiencing flow. The teleonomy of self is thus a growth principal, where it becomes a source of new goals and new skills. (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). From this, we can see that flow theory focuses neither on the person abstracted from context, nor on situational factors, discounting the individual, but on the dynamic system composed of person and environment (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Moreover, the need for continuous growth and the need to balance perceived skills with perceived challenges, are not the only factors required for people to experience flow. By studying the flow behavior of rock-climbers, chess players, surgeons and dancers, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) found that other factors are also involved. One of the crucial elements of a state of flow is the ability to center one’s attention on a limited stimulus field and become purely involved in the activity. This means that when a person experiences flow, potentially intruding stimulus must be kept out of attention. Hence, activities that include rules, competition and extra incentives may aid the experiencing of

flow. Rules help define what is relevant and what is irrelevant stimulus; competition adds pressure to the participant by including the possibility of losing; extra incentives, like monetary rewards, provide additional drive for the participant. Other conditions required for flow include a choice of participation in the activity, having a sense of control over the situation, coherent demands for action followed by clear, unambiguous feedback and a sense that the outcome of the activity is meaningful.

Flow theory has found to be applicable to a wide variety of areas and has proven to be useful in the understanding of many situations and phenomenon. A few of these include using flow theory to evaluate and improve learning activities in the classroom (Egbert, 2003; Chan and Ahern, 1999), to understand the creativity of gifted people (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and to improve psychiatric rehabilitation programs (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi and Massimo, 1992). Yet the number of studies on the application of flow theory to the workplace seems to be rather small. One such study by Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) examined how people's quality of experience in leisure and in work differ using the Experience Sampling Method. This method consists of providing respondents with an electronic pager and a block of self-report forms with open-ended and scaled items. Respondents wear the pager for a week, during which time they are paged about 56 times at random intervals. Whenever the respondent is signaled, he or she fills out a page of the booklet, indicating activity, location, and companionship, as well as describing the quality of the experience at the time on a variety of dimensions (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989). Participants of this study were recruited from five large companies and were adult workers from a variety of occupations. The experiment found that people reported having a more positive quality of experience when their

situation approximates the conditions of flow regardless of the label of the activity, work or leisure. Surprisingly, they also found that people have more flow-like experiences and report a higher quality of experience at work than at leisure. Hence, counter-intuitively, the workplace actually provides more opportunities for people to experience a higher quality of experience.

In another study, Ghani and Deshpande (1994) surveyed a range of computer users from various occupations and organizations and found that the task-scope of one's job affected the significance of perceived control and perceived challenge in the occurrence of flow. Task-scope is the extent to which a job has the characteristics of task variety, identity, autonomy and feedback. Therefore, a high-scope job involves a greater variety of skills and allows the individual greater autonomy. This study found that the experiences of flow among high task-scope individuals were more affected by changes in perceived control while low task-scope individuals were more affected by changes in perceived challenge.

So far, no study has been done to directly examine the occurrence of flow in teachers. We believe that it is possible for teachers to have flow experiences when they are teaching because of the situational and personal factors that they face. A teacher has many avenues for growth in school; they can teach students at increasingly higher grades, take up additional responsibility as the teacher-in-charge of extracurricular activities or be promoted to higher levels in the school administration. In the setting of the classroom, the teacher plays the very specific role of educating his/her student, thereby providing the framework by which a teacher can focus and limit his/her stimulus field. As an authority figure to his/her students, he/she is also given a great deal of control over the activities in

the classroom. As the primary purpose of teaching is worthy and in many ways noble, therefore, it is reasonable to assume that teachers regard their work as meaningful. However, even though it appears reasonable to expect teachers to enjoy high quality of experience, teaching is not a popular vocation and our population of teachers appears to be rapidly diminishing.

Research into this problem has shown that the staffing problems in schools are not due to a retirement of existing teacher but because of the high turnover rate in the teaching profession, which is in turn the result of job dissatisfaction and a large number of teachers leaving for better jobs and careers. (Ingersoll, 2001). Earlier studies on teacher turnover tend to focus on what type of teachers are more prone to leaving and why (Marso & Pigge, 1997; Boe, Bobbit, Cook & Whitener, 1997). While they found significant correlations between teacher turnover rate and the individual characteristics of teachers (age, number of dependant children, source of motivation, etc...), we believe that it is more effective to approach this problem by examining the interaction between a teacher and his/her environment and applying the principals of flow theory. After all, identifying types of people who can endure in the teaching profession only serves to limit the already small group of people who want to be teachers.

Accordingly, in our study, we will attempt to show that flow theory can be extended to teachers and their teaching experience. Using questionnaires that measure their self-reported quality of experience, perception of challenges in the work place and perception of their own skill level, we will test the hypothesis that teachers with a more balanced perception of skills and challenges will have a higher quality of experience. In addition, we will examine the factors that allow or prevent the experience of flow at

work. Given that teaching is a job that confers much authority and autonomy to a teacher, and that a teacher needs a wide variety of skills in order to be flexible in handling students, we can classify teachers as high job-scope individuals. Applying the results from the study by Ghani and Deshpande (1994), we would also expect perception of control to be an important factor in the occurrence of flow. We believe that even though it is possible for teachers to experience flow at work, there are factors that prevent it from taking place. For example, it is possible that teachers face intruding distractions that prevent their narrowing of attention or that they do not have a clear sense of how they should respond to situations, and receive ambiguous feedback from parents or students on their abilities. We hope that this research will not only show that flow theory extends to the experiences of teachers, but also help in identifying ways to improve the quality of experience of teachers.

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