

**The importance of psychological flow in a creative, embodied and enactive
psychological therapy approach (Arts for the Blues).**

Ailsa Parsons, Lecturer in Psychology and Dance Movement Psychotherapist, Directorate of Psychology, University of Salford, UK

Dr Linda Dubrow-Marshall, Head of Psychology and Counselling Psychologist, Directorate of Psychology and Sport, University of Salford, UK

Richard Turner, Lecturer in Counselling, York College, York, UK

Dr Scott Thurston, Reader in English and Creative Writing at the University of Salford, UK

Jennifer Starkey, Research Centre for Arts and Wellbeing, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

Dr Joanna Omylinska-Thurston, Counselling Psychologist, Greater Manchester Mental Health Foundation NHS Trust

Professor Vicky Karkou, Chair of Dance, Arts and Wellbeing, Edge Hill University

Contact: Ailsa Parsons (A.S.Parsons@Salford.ac.uk), L820, Allerton Building, University of Salford, Salford, UK, M5 4WT

Funding: This work was supported in part by the University of Salford's Early Career Researcher grant, Salford, UK.

Declarations of interest: none.

Abstract

Psychological flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; 1997) can be experienced in various occupational, recreational and creative domains and may confer increased wellbeing. Yet, very few studies have examined flow as a potential feature of creative arts therapies – particularly therapies which prioritise embodied/enactive processes. This study tested the acute effects of a 90-minute workshop (Arts for the Blues; A4B) on participants' (N = 18) mood and personal goal attainment. Psychological flow was measured, and participants rated the importance of flow in relation to A4B's psychotherapeutic aims. Results show significantly improved mood, increased goal attainment and substantial flow scores, suggesting that A4B processes may invoke flow. Participants' importance ratings of different flow dimensions indicate that some were considered as more important than others. Results are discussed in relation to methodological limitations, helpful creative therapeutic factors that may enable flow, and implications for researchers and practitioners who wish to encourage flow in their practice.

Key words: Psychological flow; Mood; Creative arts therapies; Dance Movement Psychotherapy; Arts for the Blues.

Introduction

Psychological flow

This study begins to evaluate the potential relevance of psychological flow to creative arts therapy experiences and outcomes, especially those that could be described as embodied/enactive (Koch & Fischmann, 2011), i.e. involving somatic awareness and bodily expression. The construct of psychological flow describes a phenomenological sense of being fully engaged in a challenging/effortful yet enjoyable/intrinsically rewarding activity, commonly referred to as being “in the zone” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) featuring high

concentration, self-determination, creativity and low self-consciousness (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Ullén et al., 2012). Established by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), current conceptualisations of flow include nine dimensions listed below (Jackman et al., 2016), with the first three dimensions supposedly describing conditions that give rise to the remaining six experiential characteristics:

Challenge-skill balance: Perceived equivalence of the activity's demands and the skills one possesses

Clear goals: Knowing what to do in the activity

Unambiguous feedback: Availability of instant feedback about performance

Automaticity: Sense of performing automatically, instinctively

Concentration: Narrowly focusing on the task/activity

Sense of control: Feeling in control of performance

Loss of self-consciousness: The absence of concerning self-evaluation

Transformation of time: Passing of time seeming different

Autotelic experience: Finding the experience intrinsically rewarding; enjoyable

Physical and creative flow domains

The playful, immersive and intrinsically rewarding nature of creativity – that is, the potential to create original and innovative items or ideas which are also of some value or utility (Runco & Jaeger, 2012) – overlaps with reported experiences of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Yet, experiences may differ across different domains, depending on the aims and context of the activity. Flow has been described extensively in the domains of athletic performance (e.g. Jackman et al., 2016; Swann, 2016) and in the arts (Doyle, 2017). Concentration and Automaticity have been reported in non-performative art-making (Chemi, 2016; Taylor, 2016) and, during sporting performance, these two dimensions present in addition to Sense of control and Autotelic experience, more than the other five dimensions

(Jackson, 1996). Whereas, in music performance, Sinnamon et al. (2012) reported the top three as Autotelic experience, Clear goals, and Unambiguous feedback. Recent research comparing musicians and athletes has found Transformation of time and Autotelic experience higher in musicians, while Clear goals and Unambiguous feedback were higher in athletes (Habe et al., 2019). Hence, differences in flow dimensions within different activities/domains are still being debated.

Factors enabling flow

Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) state that activities must feature clear proximal goals, just-manageable levels of challenge, and provide some form of immediate feedback in order to capture one's attention to enter flow state. However, in artmaking, Clear goals, Sense of control, and Unambiguous feedback are not typical of individuals' flow experience, with artists often being surprised by what emerges (Doyle, 2017). Despite this, it is generally agreed that a good fit between the nature or difficulty of the activity and the interests, skills or personality of the individual is conducive to flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Environments which enhance this balance between individual and activity, or involve any of the other flow dimensions, can encourage flow. Games, hobbies and leisure pursuits are prototypic flow activities (Perkins & Nakamura, 2013), with Unambiguous feedback and Clear goals available in most games, sports and in many artistic or religious performances. Group interaction has been found to generate collective flow states in artistic performances (Harmat et al., 2021). Other studies link flow's 'emotional contagion' to collaboration in artistic (e.g. Sawyer, 2007) and spiritual (Rufi et al., 2016) activities. Also, it has been argued that mindfulness body scans can increase the likelihood of flow (Aherne et al., 2011). In sporting contexts, Swann (2016) and Jackman et al. (2016) differentiate between external (e.g. environmental conditions, team play and interaction) and internal (e.g. preparation, emotion, locus of control, goal orientation, and optimism) flow-facilitating factors. The latter

three, i.e. locus of control, goal orientation, and optimism, are referred to as linked with mental toughness, therefore personality may play a role (Ullén et al., 2012). Therefore, individual, social, environmental and task-related factors influence subjective flow.

Flow and wellbeing

Surprising insights and rapid meaning-making occur during flow (Doyle, 2017). Over time, engaging in flow-promoting activities may predict psychological wellbeing (Tse et al., 2021), even during the COVID-19 pandemic (Habe et al., 2021). Douse (2017) conceptualised flow in dance improvisation as ‘eudemonic wellbeing’ emanating from personal expressiveness, self-realization, excellence, and relatedness. Rogatko (2009) reported that an hour of self-selected flow-inducing activities for one hour provides significant increases in positive affect. All flow dimensions (except Automaticity) were found to contribute significantly to the affective change. Therefore, flow may contribute to psychological benefits in activities designed to enhance wellbeing or enjoyment.

Flow within creative arts therapies

Despite the above evidence and flow’s theoretical and empirical links to insight, creativity and embodied phenomena, few studies have examined flow as a potential determinant of mood change in relation to creative arts therapies. Creative arts therapies (CATs) is an umbrella term for regulated professions that use various forms of art making – including but not limited to Art Therapy, Music Therapy, Dramatherapy and Dance Movement Psychotherapy – to enhance social, emotional and psychological wellbeing, such as improving mood, developing skills or working towards meaningful change (Shafir et al., 2020).

Flow predicted the meaningfulness of song creation during a Music Therapist-facilitated songwriting session with university students and retirees (Baker & MacDonald, 2013), and flow predicted *hope* and *readiness to change* in a songwriting intervention for

adults receiving acute inpatient care (Silverman et al., 2016). Silverman and Baker (2018) propose flow to be an active mechanism in Music Therapy – in passive (i.e. listening) but especially active (e.g. songwriting) interventions. However, we know that flow is more accessible through physical activities than mental activities (Ross & MacIntyre, 2019). Since many CATs employ physically mediated activities, such as painting or movement, they may be more flow-inducing than talking therapies. Mehta's (2018) theoretical link between Flow and Dance/Movement Therapy has been supported by Parsons and Dubrow-Marshall (2019) who reported that rapid visual and embodied insight and meaning-making were therapeutically salient in Dance Movement Psychotherapy (DMP). More evidence of flow-like phenomena comes from Taylor (2016) and Warren (2006) whose autoethnographic, observational or theoretical accounts of their own flow-like experiences in Art Therapy highlight the dimensions of Concentration and Automaticity. Further investigation of flow as a potential mechanism in more embodied and enactive CAT experiences is therefore warranted.

Recently, moderately high levels of flow were measured during a multimodal CAT (i.e. working with multiple artistic mediums) intervention called Arts for the Blues (A4B), with participants also describing some of the barriers and enablers to flow (Parsons et al., 2020). Stemming from research in DMP, and further developed using evidence from 76 research studies reporting psychological interventions for depression, A4B is a physically-engaging and pluralistic CAT. A typical A4B pilot workshop is described elsewhere (Haslam et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2019; 2020; Omylinska-Thurston et al., 2020; Karkou et al., 2022) and in the Appendix, and has been trialled in clinical (such as NHS *Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies* services), non-clinical and professional (such as in Higher Education/helping professions) populations. Preliminary results (e.g. Haslam et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2020; Karkou et al., 2022) suggest that it both improves mood and progress

towards personal goals within the session. Based on these studies and the aforementioned flow-in-CATs research, A4B is theorised to encourage participants' flow due to certain conducive features, presented in table 1:

[Table 1 here]

One pilot study of the approach (Parsons et al., 2020) highlighted the importance of *Loss of self-consciousness*, *Challenge-skill balance*, *Clear goals*, *Unambiguous Feedback*, *Intense concentration*, and *Automaticity* in order to bring about *Autotelic experience* – the intervention's intention being to positively affect participants' acute mood state. Based on the cautious yet growing theoretical and empirical evidence for flow as a salient feature in embodied/enactive activities and CATs, the current study was intended to further test this.

Aims and hypotheses

This study aimed to quantitatively measure i) pre-post changes in mood and personal goal attainment; ii) the level of flow experienced during an A4B workshop, and which dimensions are experienced most; iii) participants' ratings of the importance of flow and its individual dimensions in an A4B workshop.

In relation to the first aim, three hypotheses were tested, based on the extant theory and evidence:

H1. Participants will have significantly increased positive affect post-workshop;

H2. Participants will have significantly decreased negative affect post-workshop;

H3. Participants will significantly increase self-rated progress towards their

immediate personal goals;

Method

Study context

The study was approved by the University of Salford's Research Ethics Panel (approval no. HSR1819-108). The workshop took place at a UK university's Creative Therapies Conference, where attendees can choose which sessions they want to register for. A 20-minute research presentation provided information about the A4B approach and wider project, but not any results around flow or the specific hypotheses of the present study, thus limiting bias while still enabling informed consent. Then, following a 15-minute break, the session was facilitated by a Chartered Psychologist and Dance Movement Psychotherapist, and a Counselling and Clinical Psychologist, assisted by three research assistants.

Design

A within-group repeated measures design tested for pre-post changes, with the dependent variables being mood (questionnaire scores for positive and negative affect) and personal goal attainment (participants' perceived progress in a self-selected goal for the workshop) and the independent variable being time (start of workshop versus end). A descriptive design was used to measure participants' flow experience during the activities, and perceived importance of flow, from questionnaire data gathered immediately post-workshop.

Participants

Conference attendees were comprised largely of counsellors and psychotherapists from both verbal and expressive/creative disciplines, students of counselling/psychotherapy, and other professionals or academics with an interest in these areas. Participant information sheets explained to attendees that they were free to leave or withdraw data and they signed consent forms in order to participate in the workshop. Table 2 displays participant's self-defined characteristics:

[Table 2 here]

Participants were at working age and the majority female (83%), white British (56%) and in psychological therapy professions (72%), with the remainder students or academics. All resided in North-West England, and as garnered through discussion, most had experience or interest in creativity as a therapeutic resource.

Materials

Mood was measured using the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS), which has good reliability and validity (Watson et al., 1988) and asks participants to indicate to what extent they feel at present like a list of 10 positively-valenced (e.g. ‘Interested’) and 10 negatively-valenced (e.g. ‘Distressed’) words. Responses are on a 5-point Likert scale from one (‘Very slightly or not at all’) to five (‘Extremely’). Scores ranging between 10 and 50 are calculated for each (positive and negative) subscale by totaling responses.

Participants’ progress towards attaining a small personal goal was measured using a single-item numerical *Goal Ladder* (GL), devised by researchers as a key part of the A4B research (see Haslam et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2019; 2020; Karkou et al., 2022). The GL asks participants to set an immediate, personal goal for themselves (for example, ‘To feel calmer’) and rate the extent to which they feel that they have achieved this from one (‘I am nowhere near achieving the goal or haven’t started working towards it’) to ten (‘I have already achieved this goal’).

An acute measure of psychological flow – the nine-item Short Flow States Scale (SFSS; Jackson et al., 2008) – was used to measure the degree to which participants were in flow state during the workshop. Example questions include ‘I did things spontaneously and automatically without having to think’, with responses given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from one (‘Strongly disagree’) to five (‘Strongly agree’). SFSS demonstrates good

validity and reliability (Jackson et al., 2008), with each of its nine items correlating very highly with the nine factors of its longer 36-item counterpart. A mean of all nine SFSS items is generated, with a range of one to five, with higher scores indicating a more ‘flow-like’ experience.

To assess perceived importance of flow, an *Importance of Flow survey* (IoF) was devised by the researchers, which asks participants to consider each of the nine statements of the SFSS in turn (e.g. ‘I was completely focused on the task at hand’; see Table 4), and rate how important each of these aspects were for the therapeutic aims of the workshop (changing mood and working towards a goal) on a five-point Likert scale from 1) Not important; irrelevant to 5) Extremely important; essential. A mean of all nine items was generated, with a possible range of one to five, with higher scores indicating flow dimensions considered more important for the creative therapeutic experience.

Procedure

After providing consent, participants completed the 20-item PANAS, before the 90-minute A4B workshop commenced. The A4B approach is described earlier and elsewhere (see Parsons et al., 2019; Haslam et al., 2019; Omylinska-Thurston et al., 2020; Karkou et al., 2022). Briefly, participants attend mindfully to their internal experience to determine a personally salient and immediate goal (written-out, then rated, on the GL), then use various artistic media (movement, image making, writing) to explore the goal, before discussing this experience in pairs and as a whole group and finally re-rating their goal attainment on the GL. After the workshop, participants repeated the PANAS measure again, completed the SFSS to rate how much flow they experienced in the workshop, and finally, rated the importance of each flow dimension on the IoF.

Results

Changes in affect and goal attainment

Table 3 displays descriptive data for these measures immediately before and after the workshop:

[Table 3 here]

All PANAS data demonstrated acceptable ($> .70$) internal consistency. Median scores show an increase in Goal attainment and Positive affect, and a decrease in Negative affect. The Shapiro Wilk test revealed Post scores for both Positive and Negative affect were not normally distributed ($p = .026$ and $p = .000$, respectively). Therefore, with the GL data also being ordinal, Wilcoxon signed ranks tests were used to assess all pre-post differences.

Scores for Personal goal attainment post-workshop were significantly higher than scores at the start, $N = 18$, $Z = 3.63$, $p < .001$, $r = .86$. Scores for Positive affect post-workshop were significantly higher than scores at the start, $N = 18$, $Z = 1.94$, $p = .026$, $r = 0.46$. Scores for Negative affect post-workshop were significantly lower than scores at the start, $N = 18$, $Z = -2.33$, $p = .010$, $r = 0.55$. Therefore, H1, H2 and H3 can be accepted, as participants' goal attainment and positive affect significantly increased, and negative affect significantly decreased.

Flow experienced during the workshop

Overall Short Flow States Scale (SFSS) scores (an average of all nine dimensions, which measures the participants' overall flow during the workshop) and individual flow dimensions (individual dimension items on the SFSS) are displayed in Table 4:

[Table 4 here]

The mean of overall flow scores was 3.96 (79% of the maximum possible score). Although no cut-off points are available for the SFSS, at face value this average score would seem to indicate that participants had a flow-like experience. The lowest scoring flow dimension was Unambiguous feedback, and the highest scoring was Autotelic experience.

Agreement was highest for Concentration on the Task at Hand ($SD = .46$) and lowest for Loss of self-consciousness ($SD = 1.28$).

Therapeutic importance of flow

Participants rated the importance of flow dimensions for improving mood and working towards an immediate personal goal. Overall, out of a possible five points participants rated flow as at least somewhat important ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.63$). Table 5 displays participant's ratings of the nine individual flow dimensions, ranked from least important to most important:

[Table 5 here]

The only dimensions of flow rated below '3 – Somewhat important' were Unambiguous feedback and Transformation of time. The three dimensions of flow ranked by participants as the most important for the intervention's therapeutic aims were Automaticity, Concentration on the task at hand and Autotelic experience. Agreement on the importance of these three dimensions was also higher, displaying the three lowest standard deviations of the whole data set.

Discussion

This study aimed to measure psychological flow within a multimodal creative arts therapy (CAT) workshop (Arts for the Blues; A4B), to determine the perceived importance of flow, and to measure pre-post changes in mood and personal goal attainment. Quantitative results demonstrate significant positive changes in participants' personal goal attainment and mood, and that flow was indeed experienced during the workshop activities. These findings accord with Rogatko's (2009) study in which one hour of flow-promoting activities was associated with significantly improved mood (also measured using PANAS). As described earlier, key features of A4B – such as its enactive and embodied (Koch & Fischmann, 2011)

nature, nurturing of autonomy and agency, and client targets – promote both flow and these positive effects, which further supports research demonstrating improved psychological wellbeing affiliated with flow-experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; 1997; Habe et al., 2021; Tse et al., 2021). Overall, it can be argued that A4B may offer acute improvements in mental state and enable flow, which may be an important experiential feature within enactive/embodied CAT approaches such as A4B.

Survey responses also demonstrated that participants considered flow to be of some importance for the therapeutic aims of the workshop (mean scores 3.48 out of 5), and rated Autotelic experience, Concentration and Automaticity as the most important three dimensions, all scoring >3.79 on average. Although more recent research is limited, Jackson (1996) reported that elite athletes present these three, along with Sense of control, more than the other flow dimensions. Similarly, other studies report Concentration and Automaticity as key flow dimensions in the use of arts for wellbeing (Chemi, 2016; Taylor, 2016; Warren, 2007), while previous qualitative findings (Parsons et al., 2020) highlight the importance of these dimensions along with Loss of self-consciousness, Challenge-skill balance, Clear goals and Unambiguous Feedback (the latter two experienced more by athletes than musicians; Habe et al., 2019) in enabling Autotelic experience to occur. Therefore, it seems that in creative, embodied and enactive therapy approaches, the most important flow dimensions may overlap with those previously reported by both artists and athletes.

In terms of actual flow experience, as measured by the SFSS, the top three dimensions occurring in the present study were Autotelic experience, Challenge-skill balance and Transformation of time. The “Structured yet flexible variety” offered by A4B (Parsons et al., 2019, p.7) means that the client can choose how, and with which arts modality, to work, thereby increasing the individual-activity fit, which may explain high Challenge-skill balance and Autotelic experience, and this enjoyment may cause time to pass quickly. Participants’

Autotelic experience may also be explained by their autonomously choosing how to express artistically, yet it is also likely that in attending the conference, they were already interested in therapeutic arts, therefore results may be less applicable to wider populations.

Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) stated that, to capture one's attention and enter flow state, activities must provide a sense of competence, explicit goals, and some form of unambiguous feedback. In self-determination theory, having a sense of competence can increase intrinsic motivation towards a goal (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Additionally, flow-proneness is related to certain psychological features involving confidence and motivation (Ullén et al., 2012), and these seemingly overlap with feelings of competence and goal-directedness. Separating out these correlates from the relevant flow dimensions was not part of the present study. As mentioned previously, Unambiguous feedback has been qualitatively reported by participants (survivors of cultic abuse) in a previous study as desirable during A4B (Parsons et al., 2020). However, in the present study, having "...a good idea about how well I was doing while I was involved in the task/activity" was rated lowest of all flow dimensions both in participants' experiencing, and rated importance of it. Again, no comparison was made between different participant samples, limiting generalisability of findings.

Doyle (2017) states that Sense of control and Unambiguous feedback are not typically experienced by fine artists compared to more performative domains, and indeed these were rated by our participants as the lowest and third lowest dimensions in both their experiencing and perceived importance. Perhaps, at least in conscious awareness, the focus and aims of CATs are less on 'feeling in control' and 'doing well', than in more competitive performance domains of flow (e.g. sports, musical performance), where the common aim is performing well for an audience. However, Sense of control echoes previously reported experiences of DMP clients' empowerment – *"I could decide what I was going to do with my body... it felt*

really good to be in control because everything else in my life, I've got no control over.” (Parsons & Dubrow-Marshall, 2019, p.4). Similarly, a key tenet of A4B is “Nurturing autonomy and agency” (Parsons et al., 2019, p.7), which may include control over how and how much to engage. In the present study, participants low ratings for Sense of control and Unambiguous feedback may relate more to *releasing* notions of control, expectation or approval and defying external loci of self-evaluation (Cooper et al., 2012), which have previously been reported to impede DMP clients’ engagement (Parsons & Dubrow-Marshall, 2019). The present participants’ capacity to release control over performance again reinforces the validity of the design of the A4B intervention which provides autonomy and choice in the type and manner of creative expression, without judging artistic skill/output.

Flow states are often associated with instinctive action and hypofrontality, lowering the prefrontal cortex activity associated with controlled cognitive processes, heightening automatic/implicit activity of other brain regions such as associative mind wandering and semantic processing (Doyle, 2017). Automaticity would seem to be most relevant here, and its importance was rated as $M = 3.79$ (out of 5) in the present study. However, Rogatko (2009) demonstrated that increases in overall flow score, as measured by the SFSS, were significantly related to acutely increased positive, and decreased negative, affect (measured by the PANAS) when engaging in high-flow activities and that all flow dimensions *except* Automaticity contributed significantly to increasing positive affect. Silverman et al. (2016) demonstrated that flow predicted therapeutic outcomes (*hope*, and *readiness to change*) in a single music therapy songwriting session. However, unlike Rogatko ($N = 57$) and Silverman et al. ($N = 224$), our small sample size ($N = 18$) is less likely to be representative of the wider/clinical population, and no correlations are presented. Furthermore, in the present study, participants’ high ratings for the importance of Automaticity may result from the embodied, imaginative and enactive properties of A4B, via which participants are encouraged

to pay attention to their physical senses, imagination and instinctive physical actions. The same cannot be said for Rogatko's and Silverman et al.'s participants, who underwent self-selected and songwriting activities, respectively.

Methodological limitations of the present study include a lack of control group; therefore, it is not possible to make comparisons between pre-post outcomes of our intervention and an alternative 90-minute activity (for example, mindfulness, or sitting quietly). Secondly, we have not examined any chronology of flow experiences and mood changes, which may be of relevance – flow may lead to improved mood, but equally, certain moods may predispose one to a flow state. In addition, individual dimensions of mood were not analysed by the present study, and future studies could investigate specific affective states in relation to flow and CATs. Lastly, this was a one-off exploratory study using a comparatively small sample, the majority of whom were female, white British and in psychological professions. Although the experience of flow is analogous regardless of socioeconomic status, age, culture and ethnicity (Ullén et al., 2012), our sample is non-clinical and heavily skewed towards a majority demographic in the field of Western psychology, who were also likely to have more familiarity and comfort with engaging with both psychotherapeutic and artistic practices, therefore generalisability to wider/clinical populations is diminished.

Future research should trial multimodal approaches such as A4B with the inclusion of a control group, larger, more diverse, and clinical samples, and a longer intervention facilitated over multiple sessions. Flow should be measured using the longer Flow States Scale, which includes multiple items for each subscale, allowing more reliable analysis of flow dimensions. Research should also test whether flow and its dimensions are associated with therapeutic changes in CATs, as research on this is limited and entirely missing in embodied/enactive CATs such as A4B (or indeed, DMP). Psychological practitioners should

be aware that A4B has the potential to significantly improve affect and increase personal goal attainment in a short, acute intervention, making this a potentially cost-effective group intervention. Also, although clients can enter a flow state and perceive this to be at least somewhat important, the concept of flow as a therapeutic feature may overlap with features of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and is not well understood. Given the extant research base for the positive impact of flow for overall wellbeing, and participants' views of flow as relevant to therapeutic outcomes, researchers could consider further developing CATs which aim to increase flow acutely and in day-to-day experience over time.

Conclusions

To conclude, an Arts for the Blues workshop – an embodied, enactive and multimodal CAT approach – enabled flow in a group of 18 participants, who also experienced significant positive changes in personal goal attainment and mood. These participants also rated flow as at least somewhat important within A4B's creative therapeutic activities, with some dimensions (Concentration, and Autotelic experience) rated as highly important. The therapeutic value of inducing flow states in psychotherapeutic interventions has not been well studied and future research in this area could improve both theory and practice. Flow should be explored more fully, to understand its potential impact in embodied/enactive CATs and mental health in general.

References

- Aherne, C., Moran, A. P., & Lonsdale, C. (2011). The effect of mindfulness training on athletes' flow: An initial investigation. *The Sport Psychologist*, *25*(2), 177-189.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.25.2.177>

Baker, F. A., & MacDonald, R. A. (2013). Flow, identity, achievement, satisfaction and ownership during therapeutic songwriting experiences with university students and retirees. *Musicae Scientiae*, *17*(2), 131-146.

Chemi, T. (2016). The experience of flow in artistic creation. In L. Harmat, F. Ørsted Andersen, F. Ullén, J. Wright, & G. Sadlo (Eds.), *Flow Experience* (1st ed., pp. 37-50). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28634-1_3

Cooper, M., O'Hara, M., Schmid, P. F., Wyatt, G., & Books, P. C. C. S. (2012). Locus of evaluation. In V. Smith, P. Collard, P. Nicolson, & R. Bayne (Eds.), *Key concepts in counselling and psychotherapy: A critical A-Z guide to theory* (1st ed., pp.168). McGraw-Hill Education.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper & Row.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). Happiness and creativity. *The Futurist*, *31*(5), S8.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). Self-determination theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology: Volume 1* (Vol. 1 pp. 416–436). Sage Publications Ltd.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249215.n21>

Douse, L. (2017) Flow in the dancing body: An intersubjective experience. In V. Karkou, & S. Oliver & S. Lycouris (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook for dance and wellbeing*, (1st ed., pp. 273-292). Oxford University Press.

Doyle, C. L. (2017). Creative flow as a unique cognitive process. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, 1348. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01348>.

Habe, K., Biasutti, M., & Kajtna, T. (2019). Flow and satisfaction with life in elite musicians and top athletes. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 698. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00698>

Habe, K., Biasutti, M., & Kajtna, T. (2021). Wellbeing and flow in sports and music students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Thinking Skills and Creativity, 39*, 100798.

Harmat, L., de Manzano, Ö., & Ullén, F. (2021). Flow in music and arts. In C. Peifer & S. Engser (Eds.), *Advances in Flow research* (2nd ed., pp. 377-391). Springer. DOI:10.1007/978-3-030-53468-4_14.

Haslam, S., Parsons, A.S., Omylinska-Thurston, J., Nair, K., Harlow, J., Lewis, J., Thurston, S., Griffin, J., Dubrow-Marshall, L., & Karkou, V. (2019). Arts for the Blues – a new creative psychological therapy for depression: Pilot workshop report. *Perspectives in Public Health, 139* (3), 137-146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913919826599>

Jackman, P. C., Swann, C., & Crust, L. (2016). Exploring athletes' perceptions of the relationship between mental toughness and dispositional flow in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 27*, 56-65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2016.07.007>

Jackson, S. A. (1996). Toward a conceptual understanding of the flow experience in elite

athletes. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 67(1), 76-90.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.1996.10607928>

Jackson, S. A., Martin, A. J., & Eklund, R. C. (2008). Long and short measures of flow: The construct validity of the FSS-2, DFS-2, and new brief counterparts. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 30(5), 561-587. DOI:[10.1123/jsep.30.5.561](https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.30.5.561)

Karkou, V., Omylinska-Thurston, J., Parsons, A.S., Nair, K., Starkey, J., Dubrow-Marshall, L., Thurston, S. (2022). Bringing creative psychotherapies to primary NHS mental health services in the UK: A feasibility study on patient and staff experiences of Arts for the Blues workshops delivered at improving access to psychological therapies (IAPT) services. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 22, 616–628.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12544>

Koch, S. C., & Fischman, D. (2011). Embodied enactive dance/movement therapy. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 33(1), 57-72.

Mehta, A. (2018). Flow and dance/movement therapy: theoretical links. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 8(3), 123-127.

Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). The concept of flow. In M. Csikszentmihalyi (Ed.), *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology* (1st Ed., pp. 239-263). Springer.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8_16

Omylinska-Thurston, J., Karkou, V., Parsons, A., Nair, K., Dubrow-Marshall, L., Starkey, J.,

Thurston, S., Dudley-Swarbrick, I., & Sharma, S. (2020). Arts for the Blues: The development of a new evidence-based creative group psychotherapy for depression. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 00*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12373>

Parsons, A. S., & Dubrow-Marshall, L. (2019). “I’m able to put my thoughts into picturing them physically” – Phenomenological experiences of dance movement psychotherapy in a secondary school: Unexpected empowerment over external contingency. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 64*, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2019.05.005>

Parsons, A., Omylinska-Thurston, J., Karkou, V., Harlow, J., Haslam, S., Hobson, J., Nair, K., Dubrow-Marsall, L., Thurston, S., & Griffin, J. (2019). Arts for the blues—a new creative psychological therapy for depression. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 48*(1), 5-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2019.1633459>

Parsons, A., Turner, R., Ingleton, H., Dubrow-Marshall, L., Kefalogianni, M., Omylinska-Thurston, J., & Thurston, S. (2020). Flowing towards freedom with multimodal creative therapy: The healing power of therapeutic arts for ex cult-members. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2020.101743>

Perkins, K., & Nakamura, J. (2013). Flow and leisure. In T. Freire (Ed.), *Positive leisure science* (1st ed., pp. 141-157). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-5058-6>.

Rogatko, T. P. (2009). The influence of flow on positive affect in college students. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 10*(2), 133. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-007-9069-y>

- Ross, J., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2019). Differentiating flow experiences in physical versus mental activities: A sequential explanatory study. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology, 14*(1), 20-40. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jcsp.2018-0003>
- Rufi, S., Wlodarczyk, A., Páez, D., & Javaloy, F. (2016). Flow and emotional experience in spirituality: Differences in interactive and coactive collective rituals. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 56*(4), 373-393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167815571597>
- Runco, M. A., & Jaeger, G. J. (2012). The standard definition of creativity. *Creativity Research Journal, 24*(1), 92-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2012.650092>.
- Sawyer, K. (2017). *Group genius: The creative power of collaboration*. Basic books.
- Shafir, T., Orkibi, H., Baker, F. A., Gussak, D., & Kaimal, G. (2020). The state of the art in creative arts therapies. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 68. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00068>
- Silverman, M. J., & Baker, F. A. (2018). Flow as a mechanism of change in music therapy: Applications to clinical practice. *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy, 10*(1), 43-51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735615627505>
- Silverman, M. J., Baker, F. A., & MacDonald, R. A. (2016). Flow and meaningfulness as predictors of therapeutic outcome within songwriting interventions. *Psychology of Music, 44*(6), 1331-1345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735615627505>

Sinnamon, S., Moran, A., & O'Connell, M. (2012). Flow among musicians: Measuring peak experiences of student performers. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 60(1), 6-25.

DOI:10.1177/0022429411434931

Swann, C. (2016). Flow in sport. In L. Harmat, F. Ørsted Andersen, F. Ullén, J. Wright, & G. Sadlo (Eds.), *Flow Experience* (1st ed., pp. 51-64). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28634-1_4.

Taylor, E. (2016). Mindfulness and flow in transpersonal art therapy: An excavation of creativity. In M. Powietrzynska & K. Tobin (Eds.), *Mindfulness and educating citizens for everyday life* (Vol. 83 pp. 25-46). Brill Sense.

<https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789463005708/BP000003.xml>

Tse, D. C.K., Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2021). Living well by “flowing” well: The indirect effect of autotelic personality on well-being through flow experience. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 16(3), 310-321.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.10.003>

Ullén, F., de Manzano, Ö., Almeida, R., Magnusson, P. K., Pedersen, N. L., Nakamura, J., Csikszentmihályi, M., & Madison, G. (2012). Proneness for psychological flow in everyday life: Associations with personality and intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(2), 167-172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.10.003>

Valenzuela, R., Codina, N., & Pestana, J. V. (2018). Self-determination theory applied to

flow in conservatoire music practice: The roles of perceived autonomy and competence, and autonomous and controlled motivation. *Psychology of Music*, 46(1), 33-48.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735617694502>

Warren, S. (2006). An exploration of the relevance of the concept of “flow” in art therapy. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 11(2), 102-110 DOI:10.1080/17454830600980358

Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: the PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(6), 1063.

Appendix

A typical A4B pilot workshop is structured as follows (Haslam et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2019; 2020; Omylinska-Thurston et al., 2020; Karkou et al., 2022):

1. Opening the session by orienting clients to the approach, activities and ethical boundaries, and inviting movement into the ‘check-in’
2. Participants write down an achievable personal goal for the session
3. Engaging with a mindfulness body scan and noticing internal responses to their goal; inviting a small physical expression of these
4. Developing and exploring these responses through movement, visual art, writing, or other art forms
5. Producing creative expressions in relation to the above
6. Sharing/demonstrating, as much or as little as desired, of these expressions and perceived meanings with another participant
7. Reviewing the original personal goal and any progress made towards it

8. Sharing and reflecting on the experience as a whole group, with final collective creative expression
9. Closing the session and clients deciding what to do with their creative work

Table 1

Arts for the Blues features aligned to flow

Arts for the Blues intervention feature(s)	Relevance to flow (dimensions <i>italicised</i>)
Encouraging active engagement; Nurturing autonomy and agency	Flow occurs when actively engaging with tasks; Autonomous motivation may directly impact flow (Valenzuela et al., 2018)
Engaging with the Body	Provides opportunity for physically-mediated Flow states (Ross & MacIntyre, 2019)
Structured yet flexible variety	The client can choose how to work, increasing <i>Challenge-skill balance</i>
Coherent explanation of therapy; Client targets	Clients are well-orientated to activities and set their own personal goals, allowing <i>Unambiguous feedback</i> and <i>Clear goals</i> (Jackman et al., 2016)
Interpersonal collaboration	Clients work together in some activities, which may enable flow through interaction and collaboration (Jackman et al., 2016; Harmat et al., 2021)
Fostering social support and satisfaction	Clients are encouraged to develop interests and enjoyment outside of sessions as well as in-session – providing <i>Autotelic experiences</i> by increasing activities that may be conducive to flow such as hobbies (Perkins & Nakamura, 2013).
Connecting body and mind	Clients engage in mindful body scans, encouraging <i>Concentration</i> and flow (Aherne et al., 2011).

Structured improvisation Clients experiment with creating while ‘switched off’ from intentional, cognitive control of the artistic medium, thus encouraging *Automaticity* (Doyle, 2017).

Table 2

Participant demographics and occupations

	Age (yrs)	Gender (n)	Ethnicity (n)	Occupation (n)
<i>M</i>	44.25	Female 15	White British 10	Counsellor/Psychotherapist 9
<i>SD</i>	11.74	Male 2	British mixed/Mixed race 2	Counsellor/Psychotherapist and Student 1
<i>Min</i>	19	Other 0	Indian 1	Counsellor/Psychotherapist and Other 1
<i>Max</i>	60	Prefer not to say 1	Pakistani 1	Student 4
Missing data (n)	2		Missing data 4	Academic 1
				Other (Psych. practitioners) 2

Table 3

Goal ladder and PANAS descriptive data

	Goal attainment (GL) (N = 18)		PANAS Positive affect (N = 18)		PANAS Negative affect (N = 18)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<i>Mdn</i>	4.0	6.5	34.0	42.0	14.0	11.0
<i>IQR</i>	2.3	3.0	8.0	13.8	8.5	3.3
Internal consistency (Cronbach’s α)			.845	.947	.777	.823

Table 4*Descriptive data for SFSS*

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall SFSS	Overall flow score (mean of all nine items)	3.96	0.44
Individual SFSS items	Unambiguous feedback	3.33	0.69
	Loss of self-consciousness	3.33	1.28
	Sense of control	3.67	1.03
	Clear goals	3.72	0.75
	Automaticity	3.94	0.87
	Concentration on Task at Hand	4.28	0.46
	Transformation of time	4.33	0.69
	Challenge-skill balance	4.50	0.51
	Autotelic experience	4.56	0.62

Table 5*Importance of flow dimensions rated by participants*

Flow dimension	Question wording	Importance rating	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Unambiguous feedback	“I had a good idea about how well I was doing while I was involved in the task/activity”	2.62	1.05
Transformation of time	“The way time passed seemed to be different from normal”	2.94	1.48
Sense of control	“I had a feeling of total control over what I was doing”	3.09	1.39
Clear goals	“I had a strong sense of what I wanted to do”	3.29	1.31
Loss of self-consciousness	“I was not worried about what others may have been thinking of me”	3.59	1.68
Challenge-skill balance	“I felt I was competent enough to meet the demands of the situation”	3.68	1.07
Automaticity	“I did things spontaneously and automatically without having to think”	3.79	0.99
Concentration on the task at hand	“I was completely focused on the task at hand”	4.00	1.02
Autotelic experience	“I found the experience extremely rewarding”	4.35	0.79
Overall flow importance	(Average of all nine ratings)	3.48	1.20