

Self-control in Flow states

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INTRODUCTION:

When participating in sports, painting, playing a musical instrument, or doing other challenging tasks, there is a certain phenomenon that people can experience called 'flow state'. Flow, is typically what one might describe as being "in the zone", where a person experiences extreme focus, allowing them to display maximum performance on the task, and resulting in feelings of fulfilment and euphoria.¹ Swann et al, (2012) reviews the features of flow states, and using their research, I examine the nature of flow in relation to self-control. In many studies, researchers tend to discuss flow states with the assumption that it is a state in which one uses self-control. For example, Leary et al, (2006) describes the unique processes where one has to relinquish the desire to consciously control their behaviour in order act more naturally and thereby "exercise self-control", by entering flow or other hypo-egoic states, such as transcendence. However, by considering the definitions of self-control, this paper aims to show that the flow state has characteristics that seem to indicate no self-control is necessary, contradictory to what other articles imply.

DEFINING SELF-CONTROL:

One of the most common descriptions of self-control that researchers use is the ability to resist temptation or to control impulses.² Numerous studies have used this definition as a guideline for measuring self-control, for example, Mischel et al, (1989) measures self-control in 5-year olds, based on their ability to wait a few minutes to eat a marshmallow in front of

¹ Swann, C., Keegan, R. J., Piggott, D., & Crust, L. (2012). A systematic review of the experience, occurrence, and controllability of flow states in elite sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13(6), 807-819.

² Fujita, K. (2011). On conceptualizing self-control as more than the Effortful inhibition of impulses. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(4), 352-366.

them. Fujita (2011) proposes a somewhat expanded definition - the dual motive theory suggests that self-control involves prioritizing distal abstract motivations over concrete proximal motivations. This definition of self-control not only includes resisting temptation (such as waiting to eat a marshmallow in order to receive two later), but also self-regulation techniques such as avoidance and priming. For example, if someone who wants to quit smoking (distal motivation) chooses to not buy cigarettes, and thereby avoids having to resist smoking later at the sight of cigarettes (proximal motivation), that would be considered to be exercising self-control. Priming includes forming habits that encourage behaviour which contribute to one's distal motivations. If someone chooses to always study when they are in a certain room for example, they begin to build an association between studying and that space, and thereby will feel more inclined to study automatically when they are there- this is also considered exercising self-control. It cannot be definitively said which definition is more 'correct', simply resisting temptation or the dual motive theory. Hence, this paper looks at both definitions in relation to self-control in flow states.

CHARACTERISTICS AND NEURO-COGNITIVE FEATURES OF FLOW STATES:

Flow state is a very unique experience, characterized by heightened concentration on the task at hand, allowing for the ability to completely ignore distractions (Swann et al, 2012). One actually loses awareness of themselves and their surroundings not related to the challenge, often experiencing the feeling of time slowing down or speeding up. Research suggests that based on the nature of flow states, it seems as though in a flow state, not only is the implicit system used, the explicit system- conscious control- is temporarily suppressed (Dietrich 2004). In our minds, there are two different memory storage systems- the implicit and explicit

system.³ The implicit system allows for effortless information processing, for us to perform certain actions quickly without even thinking about it- a mental shortcut in a sense. An example of using implicit memory is riding a bike; once you learn how to you do not have to consciously think about the methodology involved, rather your body just instinctively knows how to do it. Conversely, explicit memory involves conscious recollection; when performing an action, one must consciously think about the steps involved in completing that action. Therefore, flow states relying solely on the implicit system implies that a person's performance cannot be hindered by the conscious stream of thought of the explicit system. Not that they are unconscious, but they do not have to plan out their next steps, predict an opponent's next move, or analyse the trajectory of a ball before throwing it. There is no delay in their actions caused by deliberation, allowing for maximum efficiency.

SELF-CONTROL IN SKILLFUL ACTIVITIES:

When we examine regular instances of skilful activity, such as professional sports, musicians, artists etc, most would say that they require self-control. If we consider self-control as resisting temptation for instance, in a basketball game a player may ignore the temptation to rest in order to continue playing. During a piano concerto, the pianist may be tempted to look at someone in the audience instead of the keys. There is at least the possibility for one to use self-control. Considering Fujita's expanded definition, the regime of practice in order to fulfil the distal goal of becoming a better player would also constitute as exercising self-control (and every professional needs practice and diligence in order to become a professional). Thus, skilful activity and self-control go hand in hand.

³ Dietrich, A. (2004). Neurocognitive mechanisms underlying the experience of flow. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 13(4), 746-761.

SELF-CONTROL IN FLOW STATES:

Flow states have previously been considered states in which one exercises self-control, or even displays heightened self-control. This is understandable- if we consider an instance within a regular state of mind, where a player is able to focus and ignore distractions to result in a better performance than that can be considered as exhibiting good self-control.

One of the pre-requisites for flow states is that it occurs when doing skilful activity and is loved by the person.⁴ Someone who has played soccer two times with his friends won't enter flow state at his third soccer match. There needs to be a balance between ability and challenge- not too much of a challenge where their ability is worn out but not too easy either. Persons with more expertise seem to enter flow state more easily and often.⁵ So, it's easy to conclude high self-control is required in order to *achieve* flow state.

However, in a flow-state itself, it seems self-control is *not* exercised. Rather than resisting the temptation to rest or be distracted, the mind is in a state where that temptation is not even present. Within flow state there is only one motivation at that point in time, which is to perform well in that specific moment. Due to the uncanny ability to focus, any distractions or other motivations have been removed as a threat, and thus there is nothing to overcome.

An impulse can be thought of as a quick or spontaneous inclination to act. While self-control involves inhibiting impulses, flow states do almost the opposite, as it forces one to operate solely on impulse in sense, by relying the unconscious rapid information processing of the implicit system- and that's a good thing. Self-control involves choosing a resolution over a temptation, a distal motivation over a proximal one- in other words, a person has two desires

⁴ Swann, C., Keegan, R. J., Piggott, D., & Crust, L. (2012). A systematic review of the experience, occurrence, and controllability of flow states in elite sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13(6), 807-819.

⁵ Ibid.

that conflict with each other and they must choose and follow through with one in order to enact self-control. In an ideal situation, there would be no conflict or contradiction within ourselves in the first place. That is the beauty of flow states- the impulses that one relies on during flow, i.e. the actions that they perform without thinking about it first, are ones that are positive. When our impulses are ones we encourage, there is no need for inhibition.

Approving of your impulses means that there is no need to repress it, or make a decision that goes against it, therefore self-control is not necessary. The flow state can then be described as 'letting loose', or 'breaking free', resulting in both euphoria as previously stated, and a better performance.

All in all, it seems that flow states do not require self-control because there is no temptation to overcome nor a dual-motive conflict.

CONCLUSION:

Conceptualizing flow states as a state in which one does not utilize self-control should be considered in future research when discussing self-control and self-regulation in skilful activity, and in relation to hypo-egoic states.

There is a great demand for further research on flow states, especially regarding why and how it happens, and the neuro-cognitive mechanisms involved. Due to lack of definitive evidence, one cannot certainly say that one is *immune* to temptation during flow states, and therefore, that there is absolutely no need for any self-control. There is *probably* no self-control involved in flow based on what is known at this point.

Flow state can also be discussed when debating whether self-control applies only to conscious control, or to both conscious and unconscious control. My argument is based on the idea that the 'self' in SC is the conscious self, that is, since the ability to focus/ignore distractions is unconsciously enabled, it does not constitute as self-control. However, in Fujita's article, the inclusion of self-regulation techniques implies that there is unconscious self-control as well. Using the example of priming again, the decision to only study in a specific room is conscious, but the natural inclination that develops over time, to study in that room is unconscious. We can compare this to another example- a basketball player wants to become a great player. He is constantly exercising, practicing and improving his skills to achieve that goal, while ignoring any proximal goals (such as the desire to be lazy). As his skills improve, he is able to enter flow state more often, which is effective and boosts his play, thereby contributing to his goal. Is the flow state considered self-control, or simply a part of the self-control process without it being SC itself? Whether or not unconscious processes can be SC ought to be argued and looked at more closely in future studies.

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