Beyond Motivation: Flow State

Flow, a construct from positive psychology, was first defined by Csikszentmihalyi (as cited in Fullagar & Mills, 2008, p. 533) as a "holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement". Flow experience is described as: optimal human functioning; deeply pleasurable; an experience that is intrinsically rewarding (self-rewarding); controllable; joyful; an experience where the participant is totally engaged, involved, immersed, fully focused and absorbed by the activity or "in the zone"; a cognitive state where the participant can mute internal/external distractions; the optimum psychological state where the participant is totally connected with the task such that the performance of the task seems effortless (Carter, River, & Sachs, 2013; Moreno, Cervelló, & González-Cutre, 2010; Stavrou, Psychountaki, Georgiadis, Karteroliotis, & Zervas, 2015).

Flow state has nine components (or sub-states): challenge-skill balance (balance between competitive situation and perceived skill level); merging of action and awareness (such that the required actions to complete the task are less cerebral and more automatic/reflexive); clarity of goals (e.g. strategies, instructions); unambiguous feedback (regarding progress towards goals); concentration on the current task (requiring total involvement and focus); paradox of control (exercising control without trying to be in control or using brute-force); loss of self-consciousness (focus on the task as opposed to the evaluation of one's performance); transformation of time (loss of time awareness); and autotelic experience (intrinsically motivating and rewarding/fulfilling) (Carter et al., 2013; Fullagar & Mills, 2008).

Features of social cognitive theory (SCT), achievement goal theories (AGT), and self-determination theory (SDT) regarding motivation contribute to the predisposition (preconditions) towards achieving a flow state.

Self-efficacy (SCT) is a person's judgment (or beliefs) about their own capability to successfully perform a specific task (Bortoli, Bertollo, Comani, & Robazza, 2011; Duda & Treasure, 2010). Perceived competence (an important concept in AGT and related to self-efficacy but more generalized) is a person's self-evaluation of their capability to "interact effectively in a specific achievement domain" (Bortoli et al., 2011, p. 171). Both self-efficacy and perceived competence are required to balance situational challenges to skill, a component of flow. The athlete must be presented with an adequate challenge, and the athlete must not be overwhelmed by the demands of the task--eustress (good stress) (Stavrou et al., 2015). An imbalance of challenge-skill could lead instead to anxiety, poor stress response, apathy, or boredom (not flow) (Koehn, 2013).

Goal orientation theory (GOT), based on AGT, is concerned with how an athlete defines accomplishment and judges perceived competence. A task-oriented goal perspective (intrinsic) is concerned with mastering skills/knowledge/understanding, effort exhibition, doing one's personal best, and personal growth/improvement (Stavrou et al., 2015; Duda & Treasure, 2010). An ego-oriented perspective (extrinsic) is concerned with performance comparison [with others], social comparison/evaluation, perceived adequacy, and external judgment of the performance (Stavrou et al., 2015; Duda & Treasure, 2010). Task-orientation is more conducive to a flow state than ego-orientation; task-orientation cultivates focus, merging of action and awareness,

clarity, mind-body connection, autotelic experience, and overall immersion in the task-experience (Stavrou et al., 2015). Task-orientation provides more durability. Ego-orientation creates more "external" awareness (less internal focus); could lead to more anxiety and less confidence (less likely to be productive towards optimal performance and psychological state); and by definition generally detracts from the components of a flow state (Koehn, 2013; Stavrou et al., 2015).

The concept of intrinsic motivation from SDT is more autonomous, durable and conducive to achieving a flow state than extrinsic motivation (external regulation, introjected regulation, and identified regulation) which is highly dependent on external factors, an external sense of rewards, and an external sense of satisfaction/fulfillment (Duda & Treasure, 2010). Three types of intrinsic motivation (in order of self-determination) are: intrinsic motivation-knowledge (an athlete participates for the enjoyment of learning/exploration of the activity); intrinsic motivation-accomplishment (satisfaction derived from accomplishing/creating something); intrinsic motivation-stimulation (the reward of participation is the sensory experience/stimulation) (Fullagar & Mills, 2008). Intrinsically motivated athletes participate in their activity for the "love" of the activity--for the inherent qualities and pleasure the activity provides (perceived rewards) (Duda & Treasure, 2010).

The three theories SCT, AGT, and SDT each offer different perspectives on motivation which is an important precondition of flow states (Fullagar & Mills, 2008). Self-efficacy, a high task-orientation component related to goals, and the quality of intrinsic motivation can be facilitated by coaches/instructors by creating a rich motivational climate through encouraging sportsmanship (sportspersonship). Sportspersonship has five dimensions: respsect for rules and officials; respect for opponents; respect for social conventions; respect for one's full commitment toward sport participation; and discourage being a poor loser, cheating, or competing only for material gain (Stornes & Ommundsen, 2004). Sportspersonship cultivates task-orientation (Stornes & Ommundsen, 2004). Coaches and instructors can influence the predisposition towards flow states and optimum performance/engagement.

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