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Creative Way of Living: Significance of 'Engagement' or 'Flow' and its Underlying Conditions

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Abstract

'Engagement or flow' is a content of positive psychology popularized by two American psychologists Martin Elias Pete Seligman and Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Seligman considered it as an essential component of happiness and Csikszentmihalyi considered it as a strong component for enhancement of creative process. 'Engagement or flow' simply refers being completely absorbed in activities. It is a state of complete absorption in a creative or playful activity. During flow people experience deep enjoyment, creativity and total involvement in life. Since flow refers complete absorption or engagement, it can

be possible to get such experience in any human activities. Creativity refers mental activities for production of novelty. The creative journey will become more enjoyable and deep for a person if he or she able to experience the flow in that creative process. But to experience flow in creative process, some essential conditions necessary to fulfill. This paper aim to discuss how 'flow' experience is possible to bring in any creative activities that will ultimately lead novel production. The paper also aim to discuss about the concept of 'flow' in details.

Keywords: Creativity, Engagement, Flow

1. Introduction

"Positive aspects of human experiences—joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life I call 'flow'."

--Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) [3]

Human beings are the most powerful animal in all over the world in comparison to others. They are powerful and civilized because they has intellect and creative qualities which are not found in other animals. Through intellect people can learn anything very quickly and based on those learned knowledge they can developed some novel ideas, theories, products through their creative talents. Creativity or creative talent is the human mental capacity to produce work that is both novel and useful. Any inventions in the field of science and technology and any changes in human living standards are the result of creative quality. Research studies found that creativity is an universal quality; it means all people have some short of creative quality. Novel creation in any domain happens when a person has enough knowledge and information regarding the existing rule-regulations of the domain and he/she wants to either modify or bring some new elements to that domain. But it's not an easy task. To give some novel contribution in any domain the person need to take a long, painful journey which demands a huge investment of time and labour. That's why now it is atmost important to make this long, painful creative journey enjoyable and smooth, and for that concept and knowledge of 'engagement or flow' is very essential. The term 'engagement or flow' is used by two great psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990) [3] and Seligman (2002) in many of their works. For them, 'flow' refers complete engagement or involvement in activities that sense of surrounding, time and self is completely disappear. Flow makes any task enjoyable. Thus, bring flow is atmost important to any novel invention or creative process to make that painful journey interesting, joyful, enjoyable, manageable and more engaging for the creative person.

2. Significance of the Paper

Clinical Psychology approach from the very beginning has traditionally focused on psychological deficits and disability and totally ignored clients' resilience, resourcefulness and capacity of renewal. Because of this shortcoming, Martin Seligman, Psychologist and Professor of USA along with his colleagues have begun a new approach around 1998 called 'positive psychology'. This branch of psychology primarily concerned with the scientific study of optimum human functioning and happiness. It is concerned with identifying factors that promote well-being such as: positive emotions, engagement/flow, meaningful life, accomplishment, positive relationship etc. 'Engagement or flow' is a content of positive psychology refers to the total involvement in any day to day as well as creative task up to the extent that sense of self, time and surrounding is completely forgettable. As a result person will be able to find enjoyment in any difficult tasks. Thus, it is essential to discuss this content in more details. This paper gives a brief analysis about the concept of flow, creativity and how flow experience will be possible to bring in any creative process. The entire information of the paper will encourage all the participants to realize the essentiality of this content along with entire branch of positive psychology in depth.

3. Objectives of the Paper

The objectives of the paper are:

1. To describe about the concept of 'flow' and 'creativity'.
2. To describe about flow experience in creative process.

4. Method of Data Collection

The data are collected from various secondary sources such as- books, journals, websites, blog posts, newspapers etc. to fulfill the objectives as stated.

5. Analysis of Data

The collected data's are organized according to the objectives.

5.1 To Describe About the Concept of 'Flow' and 'Creativity'

5.1.1 What is 'Engagement or Flow'?

'Flow' refers to the well-being we get from totally absorbed in the task in hand, so much that we lose track of time and feel completely at one with what we are doing. It is a state that pursues complete involvement and absorption in work, intimate relations and leisure. Prominent American psychologist Csikszentmihalyi uses this term to refer highly engaging and absorbing works. It is almost automatic, effortless and highly focused state of consciousness experience of human being regarding their works. During flow people experience deep enjoyment, creativity and total involvement with life. It is a state of complete absorption in a creative or playful activity and as a result time passes quickly, sense of self is lost, attention is completely focused on the activity and people feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished. In the flow state people become so involved in what they are doing the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves from the actions they are performing. The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow. It is not a moving up but a continuous flowing. There is no

possible reason for climbing except climbing itself; it is a self-communication. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) [3].

5.1.2 What is Creativity?

Creativity is a human quality through which novel creation is happen. That novel creation is either in physical or intangible form. It is a capacity of an individual to create some genuine ideas, product, theory, concept or anything. One of the key feature of creativity is that whatever the idea or product is developed that must be free from duplication or repetition. It means a product or idea is considered to be creative only when its exact existence is not found earlier. So it is a quality of developing a genuine, not repetitive, new and useful ideas and product.

Psychologists are found rarely agreed upon the concept of creativity. They defined it from different perspectives.

- a) **Guilford (1950's)**: "Creativity is the generation of multiple answers to a set problem." (encyclopedia, 2019).
- b) **Csikszentmihalyi**: "Creativity is any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transform an existing domain into a new one. A creative person is one whose thoughts or actions change a domain, or establish a new domain" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 28) [5].
- c) **Spearman (1931)**: "Creativity is the power of the human mind to create new contents by transforming relations and thereby generating new correlates." (Mangal, 2013, p. 334).
- d) **Goleman, Kauffman and Ray (1992)**: "Essence of a creative act lies in its novelty and appropriateness. To be creative, it must somewhat be correct, useful, valuable and meaningful." (Mangal, 2017, p. 511) [6].
- e) **OSHO**: "Creativity means bringing the new into existence, making a way for the unknown to penetrate the known." (OSHO, 1999, PP. 81-82) [7].

These definitions clearly show disagreement among psychologists regarding the concept of creativity. Psychologist J.P. Guilford was the first person who tried to defined creativity in a scientific way where he considered it as a divergent thinking ability through which fluent, flexible and novel ideas can be developed. By analyzing all these above definitions given by some prominent psychologist creativity can be defined as a *'cognitive capacity of human being through which multiple novel solutions or ideas can be possible to develop regarding a domain free or domain specific problem either through rearranging the existing knowledge in a new ways or including some small or large useful element to the existing knowledge domain. That novel ideas or creation must have positive usefulness in personal as well as social level.'*

5.2 To Describe About Flow Experience in Creativity

5.2.1 How to Bring Flow in Creative Process

Creativity is a mental capacity of developing novelty. To create novelty in any area/domain one need to go through a painful, long, trail-error journey which demand investment of huge effort and time. On the other hand, flow is concept which provides well-being experience through complete absorption or engagement in a task. Thus, bring flow is essential in any creative tasks and for that following conditions are necessary to take:

- i) **The Clarity of Goals**: Development of flow in creative works is possible through clarity of goal. The creative

process begins with the goal of solving a problem that is given to the person by someone else or is suggested by the state of the art in the domain. A clear goal provides direction or way regarding where and how to proceed. That's why it is essential for the person to clear the goal in every steps of creative or problem solving process. Complete flow experience is achievable only when goal is set in every step of the creative journey instead of setting a broad and end goal because production of novelty is the result of long term effort and for that planning and clarification of goal in each step is essential for maintaining flow. When the athlete knows she has been successful only when she wins a game with specific rules or crosses a finish line before her competitors, when the musician knows what notes to play next, when the surgeon aware how the incision should proceed moment by moment, when the farmer has a plan for how to carry out the planning will make the process flowing and engaging for them.

ii) Knowing How Well One is Doing: Knowing how well one is doing or getting feedback regarding their work is essential for engagement or maintaining flow in any creative work whether it is writing a poet, playing a music or doing a serious scientific research. Most day to day jobs give some sort of information about performance: The salesman can add up daily sales, the assembly workers can count pieces produced. If all else fails, the boss may tell them how well they are doing. Such immediate feedback is essential in any creative process to realize whether they are wasting their time or actually accomplishing something? Based on such feedback the person may make necessary modification in his/her long and short term goal for getting more genuine products through his/her creative process. It means feedback will make any creative process more engageable and enjoyable for the person who is involving for novelty. Such feedbacks are either external or internal. External feedbacks such as- judgments gave by experts, compare performance with already established criteria etc. Internal feedbacks are given by the person themselves to their works.

iii) Balancing Challenges and Skills:

High challenges + medium to high skill =	Flow
High challenges + low skill =	Anxiety and Stress
Low challenges + medium to high skill =	Apathy and Boredom

The balance of challenge to skill is essential in creating a flow experience. If the activity in question is too challenging and ones current skill level isn't up to it, he/she can easily veer off into anxiety and stress. There are two actions he/she can take to deal with this situation- either reduce the level of challenge to something more manageable or increase his/her level of skill. (Cleave, 2012, pp. 40-43) [2]. Apathy and boredom occurs in situations where there is a low level of challenges and people are at least moderately skilled.

To deal with high challenging creative work for getting flow experience one need to increase his/her skill. But it's very challenging task. At initial stage person need to force themselves toward the challenging activity until it become comfortable for them. In the word of great writer Freeman Dyson- *'I have to always force myself to write, and also to work harder at a science problem. You may work very hard for a week producing the first page. You have to force yourself to push and push and push with the hope that something good will come out. And you have to go through that process before it really starts to flow easily, and without*

that preliminary forcing and pushing probably nothing would ever happen.' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 117) [5].

iv) Full Concentration: It is typical of everyday experience that our minds are disjointed from what we do. Sitting in the class, students may appear to be paying attention to the teacher, but they are actually thinking about lunch, or last night party enjoyment. The worker thinks about the weekend; the mother cleaning house is worried about her children. In flow, however, our concentration is focused on what we do. One-pointedness of mind is required by the close match between challenges and skills, and it is made possible by the clarity of goals and constant availability of feedback. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 112) [4]. As a result of such deep level of concentration on the creative task, people loss awareness of the self. They stop being aware of themselves as separate from the tasks in which they are involved. It means their actions and awareness are merged. For example- the dancer becomes the dance, the singer becomes the song, the sailor becomes one with the boat etc.

v) Avoiding Distraction: It is atmost essential to avoid all kinds of distraction to maintain flow in creative work. Distractions interrupt flow, and it may take hours to recover the peace of mind one need to get on with the creative work. Flow is the result of intense concentration on the present, which relieves us the usual fears that cause depression and anxiety in everyday life. If the musician thinks of his health or tax problems when playing, he is likely to hit a wrong note. If the surgeon's mind wanders during an operation, the patient's life is in danger. Thus, the person who is going to involve in a serious work must need to clarify herself whether she is ready for the work; is she free from all kind of physical, mental, emotional barriers at that moment. More serious health, family, or financial problems could occupy the mind of a person so insistently that he or she is no longer able to devote enough attention to work. Flow or total engagement in any task is possible only in less or null distraction situations.

vi) Avoiding Fear of Failure: Fear of failure is also one kind of distraction need to avoid during the time involving in creative or problem solving activity. This avoidance will make the task more engaging and enjoyable for the person.

5.2.2 Result of Flow in Creative Process

The above analysis clearly point out how to bringing and maintaining flow is possible in creative activities. After following all above step properly, a person will experience following way in his/her creative process.

i) Forgetting Self, Time, and Surrounding: Generally in flow we forget time, and hours may pass by in what seem like a few minutes. The experience of elapsed time in such instances is condensed. Or the opposite happens. When we are involved in flow experiences our perception of time is distorted. For example, if we are fully engrossed in reading a good book hours may fly by in what seems like minutes. In other flow experiences the experience of elapsed time is extended. For example, executing rapid skilled manoeuvres in competitive sailing in windy conditions may take no more than seconds but during flow experiences these manoeuvres to occur almost in slow motions. In both the situations we also forget about self and surrounding. (Carr, 2004, p. 61) [1].

ii) The Activity Becomes Autotelic: The term "autotelic" derives from two Greek words, *auto* meaning self, and *telos* meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but

simply because the doing itself is the reward. When person love their work not because it gave them some short of external rewards in the form of salary, power, position, prestige etc. but because it gave them internal pleasure and satisfaction. Such experience is called autotelic experience. When person internally enjoyed their works, then it's a state of autotelic experience. This autotelic experience is possible to get only when person achieve the state of flow in their works. Person achieve the state of flow, it means they are proceeding work with a clear cut goal, they able to match between their skills and works, they totally aware about what they are doing and not feel any worry about failure. Such flow experience will help them to lead their work upto the level of autotelic.

6. Key Findings

For creating flow experiences, one needs to do following things:

- i) Select controllable but challenging tasks that require considerable skills, complete concentration and which are intrinsically motivating.
- ii) Select tasks where there are clear goals and immediate feedback.
- iii) Focus on the task, not yourself, your feelings, or the potential external rewards of the task or activity.
- iv) Expect to be no longer conscious of yourself and to experience time-distortion.
- v) Gradually increase the difficulty or complexity of the activities or tasks, so that the challenge you face matches your growing level of skill.

7. Conclusion

Flow refers 'being in the zone' or 'engagement'. It is an important pathway of well-being through totally absorbing in a task. During flow, people lose track of time and feel completely at one with their task. One of the good sign is that this flow experience can be possible to develop in any human activities including creativity. By clarifying goals, getting immediate feedback, proper balancing between challenges and skills and avoiding distractions one may able to develop and maintain flow in any creative as well as normal activities. As a result of these, one may experience deep satisfaction, internal pleasure, forgetting time, self and surrounding experiences in their work. Such flow experience has the quality to make any painful difficult task more enjoyable, manageable and completable. That's why great psychologist Seligman considered 'flow' as an important dimension of well-being.

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